

WE STILL HAVEN'T LEARNED FROM FLORIDA'S ELECTION FIASCO

In These Times

INDEPENDENT NEWS & VIEWS

November 25, 2002

The Big Picture

Film and
politics
around
the globe

Joshua Rothkopf on the
cinema that survives

Merhnaz Saeed-Vafa in
search of Iranian women

Carl Bromley goes
Bollywood

Pat Aufderheide finds
the poetry in garbage

Gabe Klinger celebrates
a director for the ages

G. Pascal Zachary on the
set in Ghana

and Joe Knowles gets *Spirited Away*



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Editorial

Bush Apologists

In the past couple of months, as the Bush administration flogs its plans for war against Saddam Hussein, a flurry of commentators, most notably Christopher Hitchens of *Vanity Fair* and David Brooks of *The Weekly Standard*, have taken the left to task for its opposition to the war.

Hitchens smothers "peaceniks," "peacemongers" and "Ramadanistas" with rhetorical meringue, sweet but insubstantial blather about how the war's opponents are plagued by either "a masochistic refusal to admit that our own civil society has any merit" or "a nostalgia for Stalinism."

Brooks, letting Stalin lie, accuses "peaceniks" of repeating "the hatreds they cultivated in the 1960s, and during the Reagan years, and during the Florida imbroglio."

Brooks has a point. Doubts about the nobility of the current administration's intentions are based on the history of past performance.

In 1975, Henry Kissinger, in congressional testimony, dismissed the abrupt cutoff in U.S. aid to Kurdish rebels who were fighting Saddam's regime with the words, "Covert action should not be confused with missionary work." No one has ever mistaken the Bush team for missionaries.

Except perhaps Brooks and Hitchens, who would have us accept that Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz and Richard "Prince of Darkness" Perle have suddenly reached the moral high ground after the mire of the '80s when they, variably, aided and abetted Central American death squads or armed and protected Saddam Hussein's war machine in his war against Iran.

After all, it was Rumsfeld who, as Reagan's Middle East envoy, was in Iraq shoring up U.S. relations with Saddam on March 24, 1984, the very day U.N. weapons experts had charged Iraq with using "mustard gas laced with a nerve agent" against Iranian soldiers, further corroborating a State Department finding two weeks earlier that "available evidence indicates that Iraq has used lethal chemical weapons." No matter, on March 29, the *New York Times* reported that unnamed American diplomats "pronounced themselves satisfied with relations between Iraq and the United States and suggest that normal diplomatic ties have been restored in all but name."

Brooks accuses "peaceniks" of filling "the air with evasions, distractions and gestures, a miasma of insults and verbiage that distract from the core issue" that Hussein is "a fundamental problem for the world."

Brooks and Hitchens' evident strategy is to dismiss the opponents of war in the crudest of caricatures and sweep aside the objections to Bush's war plans—as a midterm election diversion, as a way to ignite an already volatile Middle East, as an adventure that could cost untold thousands of Iraqi lives, as a recruiting bonanza for al-Qaeda—in favor of the unproven supposition that President Bush is right, and Saddam poses a dire threat to the world.

Does it? On this question, opposition to the war has little to do with left and right and everything to do with what is a sane, sensible policy given the facts on the ground. So far the Bush administration has provided no proof that Iraq has weapons of mass destruction or that it is actively engaged in acquiring them. For this reason, leaders in the rest of the world, with one or two exceptions, are very nervous about Bush's plans for "regime change."

Intelligence operatives are likewise nonplussed. Vincent Cannistraro, the former head of counterintelligence at the CIA and "peacenik," put it this way: "Basically, cooked information is working its way into high-level

"Cooked information is working its way into high-level pronouncements, and there's a lot of unhappiness among analysts at the CIA."

pronouncements, and there's a lot of unhappiness about it in intelligence, especially among analysts at the CIA."

Nor are top generals gung ho for this war. Anthony Zinni, the former Marine Corps general who was Bush's special envoy to the Middle East, claims that retired generals Colin Powell, Brent Scowcroft and Norman Schwarzkopf are, like him, opposed to a war against Iraq. "It's pretty interesting that all the generals see it the same way," he said, "and all the others who have never fired a shot and are hot to go to war see it another way."

—Joel Bleifuss

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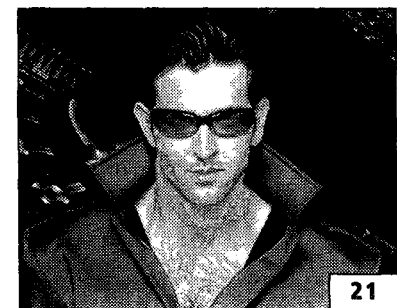
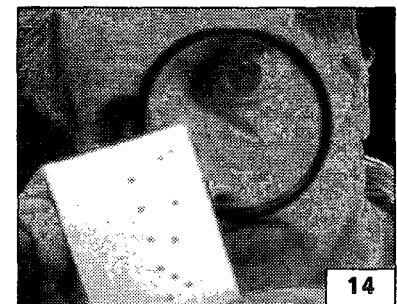
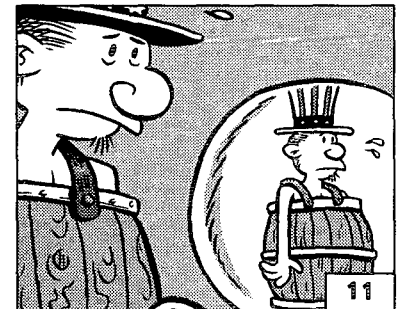
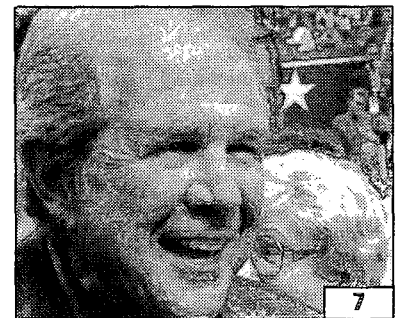
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Scapegoating

I was disappointed to read Joel Bleifuss' recent editorial ("Selling the War," October 14), in which he holds a "cabal of Israel-firsters" and their allies solely responsible for guiding U.S. foreign policy against Iraq.

I expect more from *In These Times*.

It is too easy to blame the Jewish state for all of our problems, even if Ariel Sharon seems addicted to giving us a weekly bout of *tsuris* (grief). To pretend that Israel is the driving force behind an irrational U.S. war against Saddam Hussein is not only anti-Semitic (scapegoating the outsider Jews for our domestic problems), it is misdirected.

Right-wingers have never so much supported Israel as they have the selling of American weapons and a closer position to the region's oil. Don't we all know that Bush's interest in Iraq stems as much, if not more so, from a drastic downturn in the economy during a crucial election year, the mistakes Bush's supporters feel were made by his father during the Gulf War, and the ill-defined war on terrorism?

Setting up Israel as a patsy removes the president, and us, from any responsibility for our current rush to war, while rhetorically playing into the hands of those anti-Zionists for whom the truth is less interesting than scapegoating Jews (as the same issue of *ITT* reports about racist white supremacists). While this is clearly far from Bleifuss' intentions, historically we have learned that the step is larger than we wish from leftist media blaming a "cabal of Israel-firsters" to right-wingers attacking individual Jews on the street.

It is important for publications like *In These Times* to shed light and criticize Israel's role in a potential Iraqi war. But in doing so, it is especially important to make it clear that international policies never justify discrimination at home.

Barry Joseph
New York

It was to be expected that responsibility for the administration's rush to use military force against Saddam Hussein eventually would come down on the Jews, but I didn't expect the first national publication (to my knowledge) to make such charges would be *In These Times*. Isn't it obvious to you that, in the event of attack against Saddam, the first target of his worst weapons will be Israel? And isn't it obvious that the most powerful hand in the drive for regime change in Iraq at any cost is Big Oil? I don't need your kind of bias. Cancel my subscription.

Bernard Raskin
Newhall, California

Jewish Tough Love

Suppose your son had developed a bad crack cocaine habit and was unable to break it. Would you send him money every week, no strings attached? I doubt it. What you would do is arrange for outside intervention to help your son get back on the right track.

Similarly, Ariel Sharon and his ilk are addicted to hatred and violence and have no plan for a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the Palestinians. Instead, Palestinians innocent of any crime are being killed almost every day, and millions are imprisoned under virtual house arrest—a policy that is totally illegal under the Fourth Geneva Convention.

Real love and real support for Israel in this circumstance cannot be to let Sharon act out his addictions. Rather, outside intervention in the form of international monitors and then an internationally imposed settlement with the Palestinians, based on U.N. resolutions and international law, is the only way to break the cycle of violence that is destroying Israel's soul and killing way too many innocent people on both sides.

We Jews are capable of better and are morally obligated to do better. Support Israel by actively working for a just and peaceful solution.

Chuck Sher
Petaluma, California

No Choice

In "Lie, Distort, Harass" (October 14, 2002), Neal Horsley's photo is carefully cropped so the aborted fetus doesn't show. It is ironic that this significant distortion occurs in an article critical of "misrepresentation." Later in the same edition, "Death is Different" reprints an intact photo of a woman being electrocuted. *In These Times* uses the shock value of electrocution while sweeping a photograph of a fetus under the editorial carpet.

This ensures that "choice" is a calculated, cerebral act with no opportunity to experience the visceral torque of yet another silent scream. Choice supporters rail against the depiction of fetal gore to the extent that their own psyches are ill prepared to confront the outcome of their feckless ideology.

On a late-night walk in Berkeley, California, Ken Kesey once confided: "Abortion is the Achilles' heel of the left."

Is death different? Review the photographic evidence. Then judge.

Alan Archibald
Hillsborough, North Carolina

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Please keep your letter short and include your address and daytime phone number.

Terry LaBan



Thought Police

Big Brother may be watching what you read

By Eleanor J. Bader

Within days of September 11, the police and FBI were besieged with tips informing them that several suspects—including one who fit Mohammed Atta's description—had used public libraries in Hollywood Beach and Delray Beach, Florida, to surf the Internet. Shortly thereafter, a federal grand jury ordered library staff to submit all user records to law enforcement.

The order began a pattern of government requests for information about citizens' reading material that has increased dramatically since last October's passage of the USA Patriot Act, which amended 15 federal statutes, including laws governing criminal procedure, computer fraud, foreign intelligence, wiretapping, immigration and privacy. The act gives the government a host of new powers, including the ability to scrutinize what a person reads or purchases.

According to a University of Illinois study of 1,020 libraries conducted during the first two months of 2002, government sources asked 85 university and public libraries—8.3 percent of those queried—for information on patrons following the attacks. More detail is unknown since divulging specific information violates provisions of the legislation.

"The act grants the executive branch unprecedented, and largely unchecked, surveillance powers," says attorney Nancy Chang, author of *Silencing Political Dissent*, "including the enhanced ability to track e-mail and Internet usage, obtain sensitive personal records from third parties, monitor financial transactions and conduct nationwide roving wiretaps."

In fact, a court can now allow a wiretap to follow a suspect wherever he or she goes, including a public library or book-

store. That's right: Booksellers can also be targeted. What's more, the government is no longer required to demonstrate "probable cause" when requesting records. "FBI and police used to have to show probable cause that a person had committed a crime when requesting materials," says Chris Finan, president of the American Booksellers Foundation for Free Expression (ABFFE).

"Now, under Section 215 of the Patriot Act," Finan continues, "it is possible for them to investigate a person who is not suspected of criminal activity, but who may have some connection to a person [who is]. Worse ... there is a gag provision barring bookstores or libraries from telling

Act request for information on both the number and content of subpoenas issued. To date, there has been no response to their entreaty; though such responses are required by law, they can often take months or even years to complete.

But community activists, librarians and publishers have joined forces to publicize the threat that the act poses to free speech, privacy and civil liberties. The American Library Association, a national alliance of library staff, issued a statement in early 2002 affirming their position: "Librarians do not police what library users read or access in the library. Libraries ensure the freedom to read, to view, to speak, and to participate."

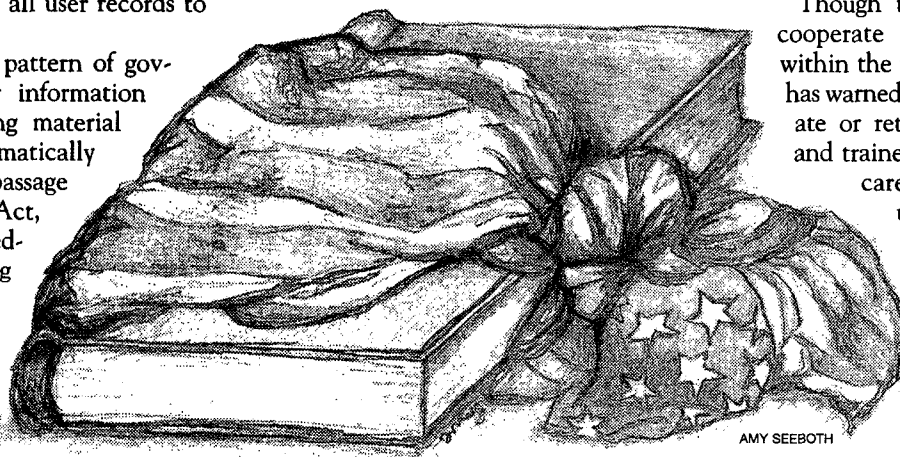
Though the ALA has agreed to cooperate with federal requests within the framework of state law, it has warned local branches not to create or retain unnecessary records, and trained staff to read subpoenas carefully before providing unnecessary information.

Despite this modicum of defiance, everyone agrees that Section 215 has begun to exact a toll. "Right after 9/11, Americans seemed eager to learn more about the world," says

Larry Siems, director of International Programs at the PEN American Center. "They were reading, buying and checking out books on Islam. ... But the administration's overall approach discourages people from seeking information. It is counterproductive. We end up with a society that is more isolated, less able to respond to the rest of the world."

In addition, he states, the Constitution guarantees that Americans have the right to read books, write books, and express their opinions. Even when the ideas expressed are unpopular—even when they're downright unpatriotic or seditious—the government should not be in the business of prohibiting them. Indeed, he cautions, a distinction between acts and ideas is imperative.

Finan and Chang agree, and they are doing their best to ensure that the Patriot Act fades away in October 2005, when it is set to expire. "At the very least," Finan concludes, "we want changes in sections like 215, to exempt libraries and bookstores from scrutiny." ■



anyone—including the suspect—about the investigation. Violators of the gag order can go to jail."

Members of Congress, as well as librarians, booksellers and ordinary citizens, have expressed outrage and concern over the Orwellian reach of the law. On June 12, the House Judiciary Committee sent a 12-page letter to the Justice Department requesting hard data on the number of subpoenas issued to booksellers and libraries since last October. Two months later, on August 19, Assistant Attorney General Daniel J. Bryant responded. The figures are "confidential," he wrote, and will only be shared with the House Intelligence Committee. The Judiciary Committee told Bryant the response was unsatisfactory. Finan reports that everyone is "waiting to see what the committee will do next."

Meanwhile, the ABFFE has joined a coalition of booksellers and libraries to denounce Section 215. They have also signed onto a Freedom of Information

Harvesting Discontent

Talking capitalism at the Bioneers conference

By Christine Keyser

SAN RAFAEL, CALIFORNIA—The environmental movement has finally realized that it must challenge the entrenched political power of corporate America and global capitalism to have any hope of creating a sustainable future for our ravaged planet and its inhabitants. That was the overriding consensus at this year's Bioneers Conference, an annual gathering of ecologists, organic farmers, herbalists, indigenous healers, green entrepreneurs and eco-designers who convened here from October 18 to 20 to share their strategies for a "revolution from the heart of nature."

"There is a very, very strong emphasis this year on the fact that cleaning up the

environment means cleaning up politics," says Kenny Ausubel, founder of the Bioneers and the Collective Heritage Institute, the nonprofit organization in Santa Fe, New Mexico that organizes the conference. "At the center of that is corporate power. To me the 'gulf war' to focus on is the gulf between rich and poor. It's what drives environmental destruction."

Leading the Bioneers' attack on globalization and corporate greenwashing was Paul Hawken, author of *The Ecology of Commerce* and *Natural Capitalism*. Hawken argued that corporate dominance of the global commons—air, water, crop seeds, oceans, forests and even the human genome—has rendered notions of environmental restoration and sustainability untenable until capitalism is replaced by a saner economic model that benefits everyone.

"There can be no sustainability when the rules are being shaped by corporations whose sole goal is to make money," Hawken stressed. "This is a political issue. It is not an ecological problem."

Ausubel invited DuPont corporate vice president Paul Tebo to sit on a panel titled

"Greening Large Corporations: Love 'Em or Leave 'Em" with Hawken and Richard Grossman, co-founder of the Massachusetts-based Program on Corporations, Law, and Democracy. Tebo has won a number of national awards for his work in cleaning up DuPont. "He's very effective in what he does," Ausubel says. He's probably considered a revolutionary within the system."

In a lively exchange, the three debated corporations' professed commitment to environmental principles. Tebo recited a litany of progress DuPont has made under his direction in the past 10 years: Phasing out production of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons, or CFCs; reducing emissions of greenhouse gases by 60 percent and hazardous waste by 40 percent; and sharply cutting energy usage, saving \$400,000 a year in lighting costs alone. "I'm not going to defend what we did, but I'm saying we're committed to change," Tebo said. "My dream is ... to create value that helps everyone in the world—rich and poor alike."

But Grossman charged that the DuPont family has exemplified the worst excesses of corporate greed. "Corporations are autocratic, dictatorial and fundamentally anti-democratic," he said. "They're machines for vacuuming up resources."

While DuPont has reduced its own greenhouse gas emissions, Hawken added, the corporation with the motto "better living through chemistry" remains one of the world's leading producers of toxic fungicides, pesticides and herbicides that are poisoning the planet. Meanwhile, it has become the world's largest seed company and is compelling traditional farmers to sign licensing agreements to use seeds they once freely harvested from the land. And like Monsanto, DuPont is replacing natural seed stocks with genetically engineered seeds.

Most Bioneers were optimistic that global capitalism can be transformed through public pressure. "What we really have is an electronically operated global casino that does not follow any market logic," says Fritjof Capra, founder of the Center for Ecoliteracy in Berkeley. "The so-called global economy is essentially a network of computers programmed to the goal that making money is the highest value. But it can be programmed to human values."

"The American people never asked for corporate rule," Hawken agreed. "We will in our lifetimes, I believe, convict corporations of crimes against humanity." ■

THIS MODERN WORLD

by TOM TOMORROW

OCTOBER, 2002: FEARING A VOTER BACKLASH, DEMOCRATS VOTE TO GIVE BUSH AUTHORITY TO ATTACK IRAQ.

THE COUNTRY NEEDS TO UM, SPEAK WITH ONE VOICE. FOR THE MOMENT.

BUT ONCE WE GET PAST THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS, BOY, THOSE REPUBLICANS BETTER WATCH OUT!



DECEMBER, 2002: THE MIDTERM ELECTIONS ARE OVER, BUT DEMOCRATS CONTINUE TO BIDE THEIR TIME.

WELL, YOU KNOW, THE PRESIDENT'S APPROVAL RATINGS ARE STILL REASONABLY STRONG RIGHT NOW!

BUT THE MOMENT HIS NUMBERS DROP, WE'LL DEFINITELY SPRING INTO ACTION!



NOVEMBER, 2004: DECIDING THAT THEY WILL PROBABLY LOSE THE PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS, DEMOCRATS DECLINE TO NOMINATE A CANDIDATE. GEORGE W. BUSH WINS A SECOND TERM BY DEFAULT.

WE JUST DIDN'T WANT TO WEAKEN OUR CHANCES FOR 2008!

BUT AS SOON AS I'M IN THE OVAL OFFICE, WE'LL START KICKING SOME REPUBLICAN BUTT FOR REAL!



JUNE, 2006: THE PRESIDENT STRIPS CONGRESS OF ALL BUT CEREMONIAL DUTIES. THE DEMOCRATIC RESPONSE IS SUBDUED.

WE DON'T FEEL IT WOULD BE APPROPRIATE TO OPPOSE THE PRESIDENT RIGHT NOW, WHAT WITH THE VARIOUS WARS AND ALL.

BUT ONE OF THESE DAYS, THE SPARKS ARE REALLY GONNA FLY--BELIEVE YOU ME!



AUGUST, 2010: PRESIDENT-FOR-LIFE BUSH DECLARES MARTIAL LAW AND DISBANES THE LEGISLATIVE AND JUDICIAL BRANCHES COMPLETELY. DEMOCRATS VOICE NO OBJECTION.

WE DON'T WANT ANYONE TO THINK WE'RE SOFT ON TERROR!

BUT IF THE STATE OF EMERGENCY IS EVER LIFTED-- THEN WE'LL STAND UP TO THE ADMINISTRATION FOR SURE!



JANUARY, 2143: THE CRYOGENICALLY PRESERVED BRAINS OF TOM DASCHLE AND HILLARY CLINTON CONSIDER ISSUING A STATEMENT SUPPORTING THE RESTORATION OF DEMOCRACY.

NOT RIGHT AWAY, OF COURSE-- BUT MAYBE IN ANOTHER TWENTY OR THIRTY YEARS...DEPENDING ON WHAT THE OPINION POLLS SAY...

AND THAT'S WHEN WE'LL START TO SEE SOME REAL CHANGE AROUND HERE!



TM TOMORROW 10-23-02

Home Care Hardship

SEIU lobbies for raises in Illinois

By Kari Lydersen

As a home health care worker for elderly and disabled indigent people, 29-year-old Regina Hagerman takes temperatures, cleans rooms, helps patients dress and administers medication, among other tasks. She raises her five children in Chicago on \$13,806 a year, working 45 hours a week at \$5.90 an hour.

She is also suffering from ovarian cancer. And like most of the about 37,000 other home health care workers in Illinois, she has no health insurance.

Home health care workers are "family members, social workers, nurses and maids all in one," says home care worker Lisa Marie Alexander. They attend to the basic medical needs of the 68,000 clients in Illinois, in addition to making sure their surroundings are clean and helping them through periods of emotional distress. "It's physically stressful, because we are lifting people and turning people over,

things like that," says Alexander, 35, who also works doing child care at a YMCA for what are sometimes 13-hour work days. "But even more, it's emotionally tiring."

"You have to be a loving, caring person to do home care work," says Helen Miller, 66, a home care provider and president of Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 880, which represents about 13,500 home care workers. "Clients look for their home care workers sometimes more than their families, because they know you'll be there."

Despite all their duties, home health care workers in Illinois are paid only \$5.75 to \$7 an hour, no more than one would make at a fast food joint. And that's with few or no paid holidays, vacation days or sick days—not to mention that 58 percent have no health care benefits. SEIU Local 880 has been campaigning for almost two decades to secure raises and benefits for home care workers, who are hired by



Home health care workers rally against fast food wages.

a variety of private and government agencies and paid by the state, either through the Department of Aging for elderly clients or the Department of Human Services for the disabled.

Despite tireless lobbying, marching and letter-writing, the union so far has gotten little but broken promises. A \$1-an-hour raise for all home care workers was passed in Illinois' fiscal year budget, which was

Election Protection

In October, the People for the American Way Foundation (PFAWF) joined the National Coalition on Black Civic Participation, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Education Fund and numerous other groups to announce the "Know Your Rights/Election Protection" program, designed to aid citizens in voting on November 5. Hundreds of thousands of copies of "Know Your Rights" booklets have already been distributed, and volunteer poll monitors will be on hand at voting sites in 19 states. Wearing "You Have the Right to Vote" T-shirts and armed with cell phones they can use to call a national lawyer hotline set up for the purpose, "Our volunteers and staff will be ready to help any voter who is experiencing problems voting," explained Delisa Saunders, PFAWF director of civic participation. "We want to prevent any repeat of the vast disenfranchisement experienced by voters during the 2000 election."

Two million voters had their votes thrown out nationwide through negligence or faulty equipment during the 2000 elections, according to a study released in October by Harvard University's Civil Rights Project. The study reports those votes were much more likely to be spoiled in predominantly African-American counties: Of the 100 counties with the worst spoilage rates, 82 were concentrated in Georgia, Florida, South Carolina and North

Carolina. Insists PFAWF President Ralph G. Neas, "We cannot and do not accept disenfranchisement as inevitable."

Can't Buy the Bayou

In a blow to privatization projects nationwide, the New Orleans Water and Sewerage Board decided not to privatize the city's water and sewage systems in October after considering bids submitted by three different entities. United Water, owned by the global water conglomerate Suez; USFilter, a subsidiary of the now perilously near junk-bond-rating entertainment conglomerate Vivendi Universal; and a group of the city's own municipal water system employees all submitted bids to take over the system.

But on October 16, after a massive organizing and education campaign spearheaded by Public Citizen, the Service Employees International Union and ACORN, and that included more than 90 other church and civic organizations, the Water and Sewerage Board decided to reject the idea of privatization entirely. Said Wade Rathke, chief organizer for the SEIU, "The size of our coalition and the outpouring of support from the neighborhoods, workers and all segments of the community sent the board a message that was unmistakable: Vote no, and they did."

Blessing for Whom?

Pat Robertson shows some
faith-based initiative

By Bill Berkowitz

When President Bush announced his faith-based initiative in January 2001, televangelist Pat Robertson was among the first on the religious right to blast the initiative. "I really don't know what to do," Robertson told viewers of his TV show, *The 700 Club*. "But this thing could be a real Pandora's box. ... What seems to be such a great initiative can rise up to bite the organizations as well as the federal government. And I'm a little concerned about it, frankly."

Robertson was worried that groups he didn't care for would be eligible to receive public tax dollars under the Bush plan, including Hare Krishnas, the Church of Scientology and followers of the Rev. Sun Myung Moon.

Now, one of the earliest and most vociferous critics of President Bush's faith-based initiative is smiling all the way to the bank. In early October, the Department of Health and Human Services awarded a \$500,000 "demonstration grant" to Robertson's Virginia-based Operation Blessing International.

Operation Blessing was among 21 groups receiving a total of \$24.8 million from HHS through something called the "Compassion Capital Fund"—a program approved by Congress last year to provide grants to religious and social service organizations.

Included among the 21 groups were such faith-based organizations as Philadelphia's Nueva Esperanza, which got nearly \$2.5 million; the United Way of Massachusetts Bay, which received \$2 million; Christian Community Health Fellowship of Illinois, which got \$1.1 million; and Volunteers of America, which received \$700,000. Another \$850,000 went to fund research into how religious groups provide social services, a subject about which little is known.

HHS implemented the program to provide small faith-based groups with



Televangelist Pat Robertson.

the technical assistance they need to successfully apply for further funding. The grants were awarded even though a compromise version of the president's faith-based initiative still languishes in Congress. Bush is asking Congress for \$100 million in unrestricted funds for faith-based funding for next year; while the House has agreed to the increase, the Senate has voted to keep funding at this year's level.

By sidestepping Congress through discretionary grants, the administration doesn't have to deal with such thorny issues as separation of church and state, as well as discriminatory hiring practices by faith-based organizations—particularly those directed at gays and lesbians. Bobby Polito, director of the HHS Center for Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, said in an interview with *The Associated Press* this summer that organizations receiving government funding would be permitted to consider religion as a factor in employment.

There are also questions about where the money is really going. Operation Blessing, for example, has a somewhat questionable reputation. In 1996, the Norfolk, Virginia-based *Virginia-Pilot* newspaper reported that two pilots who were hired by the charity to fly humani-

tarian aid to Zaire in 1994 were used almost exclusively for diamond mining operations. Chief pilot Robert Hinkle claimed that in the six months he flew for Operation Blessing, only one or two of more than 40 flights were humanitarian—the rest carried mining equipment.

Operation Blessing resources were being diverted to support the African Development Co., a private corporation run by Robertson. At the time, Robertson also had a relationship with Zaire's then dictator, Mobutu Sese Seko. "My first impression when I took the job was that we'd be called Operation Blessing, and we'd be doing humanitarian work," Hinkle, a former Peace Corps volunteer, told the *Virginia-Pilot*. "We got over there and 'Operation Blessing' was painted on the tails of the airplanes, but we were doing no humanitarian relief at all."

Charles Henderson, executive director of CrossCurrents, an interfaith organization, recently pointed out that Operation Blessing has made some awfully strange purchases. Last year, the organization that prides itself on helping the poor and hungry in Third World countries spent more than \$2.5 million on Ensure, a dietary supplement, and Splenda, a no-calorie sweetener; and more than \$10.4 million on candy and panty hose.

Advocates for government funding of faith-based organizations argue that religious groups dispense services more quickly than the government and have dramatically lower administrative overhead. But Henderson claims Operation Blessing's administrative expenses far exceed the zero to 10 percent claimed by faith-based supporters. Out of a total budget of \$36 million in 1999, according to tax returns, Operation Blessing's administrative costs were over \$11 million—a far cry from 10 percent. Henderson estimates that, after considering administrative costs for all of the smaller and subsidiary organizations the group grants to, "about half of all donations to Operation Blessing [reach] those who are truly needy." ■

A version of this article previously appeared at www.TomPaine.com.

BY SARA BERNDT

Justice in Guatemala

The historic conviction on October 3 of a former Guatemalan military officer, Col. Juan Valencia, for the 1990 murder of anthropologist Myrna Mack has shocked the Central American country's judicial system. It is the first time that the mastermind of a political murder has been convicted for crimes committed during Guatemala's 36-year civil war, which ended in 1996.

If it weren't for the tireless efforts of Myrna's sister, Helen Mack, the landmark case would never have been tried. Mack has devoted the past 12 years of her life to pushing the case through Guatemala's moribund legal system. Thousands of similar cases languish in the courts, lacking a champion with the resources, connections or foolhardiness to overcome the inertia of a weak judicial system. "In the case of my sister," Helen Mack told *In These Times*, "what we called into question was terror as a state policy, and we won."

In the '80s, the U.S.-backed Guatemalan army was attacking resistance populations and other rural communities in a "scorched-earth" counter-insurgency campaign. During the war, advocates like Myrna, who tried to focus international attention on the military's abuses, were followed, threatened and killed. The justice system was powerless to prosecute attackers, who were often associated with the Guatemalan Presidential Security Guard (EMP). The EMP, a notoriously secretive and powerful intelligence branch of the military, has been implicated in many of Guatemala's most notorious human rights abuses.

Myrna Mack's work with internal refugees, and specifically her first-hand reports that many communities attacked by the army were noncombatants, was the first hard evidence that the military's scorched-earth policy was harming innocent civilians. The vast majority of the 200,000 people who were killed or are still missing were members of Guatemala's largely rural Mayan population. On September 11, 1990, Mack was stabbed 27 times and left to die on the sidewalk in front of her office in Guatemala City.

In 1993, Helen Mack's tenacity led to the conviction of Myrna's murderer, Noél de Jesús Beteta, a lower-level EMP operative who was sentenced to 25 years in prison. But Helen Mack and other human-rights advocates in

Guatemala knew the order must have come from higher up. They were determined to push forward in an effort to punish her sister's true killers—Beteta's superiors in the EMP, who had planned the crime.

Valencia, the colonel convicted in October, was sentenced to 30 years in prison. Two other former senior officers, Gen. Augusto Godoy and Col. Juan Guillermo Oliva, were acquitted by the three-judge panel in Guatemala City. At the time of the murder, Godoy was the chief of the EMP.

Valencia, as head of security at the EMP, was Beteta's superior at the time of the murder; Oliva was Valencia's second-in-command.

Helen Mack's struggle to bring the case to court was supported by many ordinary Guatemalans. "I believe that Guatemalans saw their stories reflected in my sister's story," she says, "because my sister was one among the thousands who died. Many Guatemalans did not understand why their relatives were killed. That's why I dare to say that I was speaking on behalf of all those displaced, of all those extrajudicially executed, of the disappeared and the tortured, who never had the opportunity to discuss precisely what we discussed in the courts."

But even this partial victory comes at a high price for those involved. In

Guatemala, the military is powerful enough that dozens of witnesses, prosecutors and judges who had contact with the case have been threatened or forced to flee the country. In 1991, the police investigator in charge of the case was killed after turning in a report that included evidence pointing to the military's involvement in the Mack murder; another investigator is in exile. Before and during the course of the trial, Helen Mack was herself threatened, and in August, shortly

before the trial began, one of her attorneys had shots fired at his home.

It remains to be seen how the conviction will impact the Guatemalan Republican Front (FRG), Guatemala's ruling party. The FRG includes Efraín Ríos Montt, the military dictator at the height of the dirty war during the early '80s who is now president of the Guatemalan Congress. He has announced a run for president in 2003, but in the meantime faces a court case accusing him of genocide. It is likely the FRG's flawed imple-



Helen Mack and her lawyer Roberto Romero celebrating victory in Guatemala City.

mentation of the 1996 peace accords, which required the disbandment of the powerful EMP, will be an important issue with voters during the campaign.

Helen Mack acknowledges that Guatemala's peace process will be a long struggle. "If we seize the opportunity," she says, "Guatemalans could enter into a reconciliation process. The problem is that the military elites in particular do not want to begin to tackle this issue." ■

MARIO LIMARES / REUTERS

Turning Nothing into Something

By Susan J. Douglas

Yesterday, my daughter and I went to the movies. The first 15 minutes were ads. First, there were the Mountain Dew flash cards grilling moviegoers on important facts such as what kind of animal the lead character in *Caddyshack* was trying to do in. (Answer: a gopher.)

The young woman seated in front of me, well-schooled by the corporate media, knew all the answers. I wondered whether she would have been able to answer flash cards, sponsored by the League of Women Voters, quizzing her on the identity of her representatives in Congress. But the Multiplex 17 doesn't want people thinking about that.

Next came ads for the E! network, a new Pontiac car and more soda. Then there was an ad for the theater itself. Finally, the movie started. Because we had gone to see the trash-horror film *The Ring* (as opposed to a James Bond film, for example), product placement within the movie was mercifully minimal.

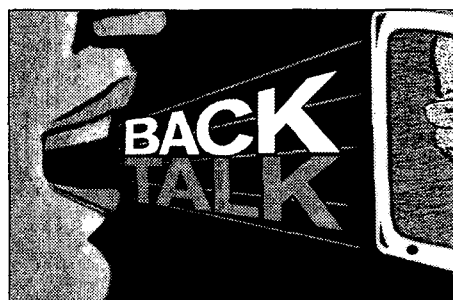
No wonder there is a core group of people around the country (and world), many of them young, who have absolutely, totally had it with the ceaseless onslaught of commercialization and the international monopoly capitalism that makes it possible. They have made anti-WTO, anti-IMF rallies significant events, despite marginalization by the corporate news outlets. And many of them read the magazine *Adbusters*, frequent its Web site, and regard themselves as "culture jammers."

This group will be participating in a still little-known event promoted by *Adbusters* called "Buy Nothing Day," which is always held on the Friday after Thanksgiving, the biggest shopping day of the year. This will be the 11th year of Buy Nothing Day, and *Adbusters* is hoping for increased participation and coverage given the recession, revelations of corporate greed and thievery, and ever-growing (but under-reported) suspicion of Team Bush.

For those who don't know, *Adbusters* is a nonprofit, activist organization based in Vancouver that publishes the magazine (noted, in part, for its scathing send ups of current ad campaigns), produces "subvertisements" (faux TV ads that lambaste

overconsumption, which all the major networks have refused to air), and organizes various actions and events.

Adbusters makes an explicit connection between the commercial corruption of our mental and physical environments. As the Web site puts it, "Overconsumption is the mother of all our environmental problems." In one subvertisement, we see a person with a bar-code on the back of his



neck watching TV. The tag line reads, "The product is you."

Participants in Buy Nothing Day have several plans of action on November 29, some of them infantile, some very smart. One member of the online chat group proposed that people go together to Wal-Mart, fill shopping carts until they're overflowing, get in line, then say, "Ooh! I forgot something. I'll be right back," and simply duck out of the store.

This proposal was immediately attacked by other culture jammers. One noted that no one is going to have an epiphany about the perils of overconsumption as a result of fuming in a Wal-Mart checkout line. Another observed that the main people to pay for this would be the already underpaid and overworked employees.

Other activists have proposed printing out small information sheets about the sweatshops that produce Abercrombie & Fitch or Gap clothes and slipping them inside the pockets of the clothes on the racks. Some proposed taping these sheets on napkin dispensers at shopping malls. Others will be targeting parked SUVs with information sheets about what gas hogs and death traps they

are. Then there are those who plan to set up free coffee stands outside of Starbucks to protest its displacement of independent shops—a proposal countered by others who argue that Starbucks is a comparatively decent employer of low-wage workers.

The problem with simply refusing to buy stuff for one day is that the action will barely be noticed and, if it is, will be attributed to the lousy economy. We are caught in a trap here. If tens of thousands of us, for example, called off buying all those stupid Christmas presents, who would be hurt the most? The Walton family? Bill Gates? What about low-wage workers who count on the overtime, the seasonal workers who count on the extra, part-time jobs? What about those, predominantly women, working in retail sales?

Buy Nothing Day is a wonderfully exhilarating idea. You can actually feel like you're doing something by not doing something. And if Buy Nothing Day gets new young people involved in more directed, concerted efforts, like anti-sweatshop organizing, environmental campaigns, anti-sprawl movements and media activism, then it could have long-term benefits.

If tens of thousands of us called off buying all those stupid Christmas presents, who would be hurt the most?

But if Buy Nothing Day encourages the very thing it is designed to undermine— instant gratification, been-there-did-that protest—and at the same time hurts low-wage workers, what have people accomplished? Frankly, I'd just as soon see people visit www.adbusters.org on November 29, give friends subscriptions to the magazine, and buy the videotapes of their subvertisements that no teacher or activist group should be without. ■

Susan J. Douglas is a professor of communications studies at the University of Michigan and author of Where the Girls Are.

Under the Gun

By Rick Mercier

Here in Fredericksburg, Virginia, amid the fear and anger over the sniper rampage, one topic has been largely overlooked: how to revise gun laws to aid criminal investigations and to prevent some gun crimes from ever occurring.

This is gun country. People here flock to gun shows, where rifles like the kind the sniper apparently used are for sale, no questions asked. Virginia's Democratic governor, Mark Warner, eagerly courted gun owners in his campaign last year—and he has not disappointed them. While discussing the sniper attacks recently on a Sunday-morning TV talk show, the governor expressed support for maintaining the gun law status quo.

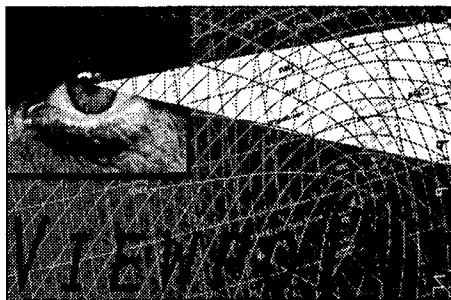
But not everyone agrees with him. One idea receiving considerable attention is a proposed national firearms "fingerprinting" system. The concept is straightforward: A bullet and its shell casing are scratched as they are propelled through a gun's barrel, producing markings unique to that gun. A database could be created that would include images of test-firings from all new guns (the system would not include fingerprints of guns already in circulation).

Most experts think such a ballistics database would be valuable. "What a fabulous opportunity it would be to have a system that gave you the make, model and possibly the purchaser of a gun, just from a shell casing ejected at the crime scene," the director of the firearms division of the California Department of Justice told the *New York Times*. "It would be just like a criminal leaving his license plate at the crime scene."

The Bush administration, parroting the National Rifle Association, initially questioned the reliability of ballistics fingerprinting, then announced on October 16 that it "wants this issue explored." The administration knows perfectly well, however, that the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms already studied firearms fingerprinting and concluded that the technology helped solve violent gun crimes that "would not have been solved without it." In fact, the ATF's own partial ballistics database—a system that holds approximately 120,000 firearm fingerprint images on bullets and guns

involved in criminal investigations—has helped crack cases across the country.

Nevertheless, the gun lobby still questions ballistics technology, which is used in 27 countries, including Germany, Sweden, Israel and Thailand. White House press secretary Ari Fleischer said a criminal could alter the marks on bullets by filing the gun barrel and that a weapon's fingerprints change over time.



But the ATF report says examples of gun-tampering are rare and gun marks are reliable evidence "in the overwhelming majority of cases." The ATF's former head of crime gun analysis told the *Times*, "We test-fired a gun 5,000 times, and the technology was able to match the first round with the last round."

The NRA also has argued a gun fingerprinting system would fail because criminals often use stolen weapons. But law enforcement experts say criminals are more likely to buy their guns new from legal buyers who peddle weapons on the street. This would indicate the value of a system that allows authorities to trace a gun back to its original purchaser, since there are instances when that person could offer an important lead in a criminal investigation.

The Violence Policy Center's Matthew Nosanchuk, who specialized in gun legislation in the Clinton Justice Department, insists "the discussion that we need to have is much broader than just ballistics."

He's right. One matter that should be debated is the so-called gun-show loophole, which allows many gun sales to occur without any background checks at all. These shows, which the Violence Policy Center calls "Tupperware parties for criminals," offer an easy, untraceable way to buy

guns—especially chilling considering the plethora of semi-automatic assault weapons and high-powered rifles typically available.

The looming expiration of the federal ban on sales of new semi-automatic assault weapons also requires attention (firearms of this kind produced before the 1994 law went into effect were "grandfathered" and can still be possessed or sold). The ban will "sunset" in September 2004 unless renewed. Even though nearly every law-enforcement organization in the country supports maintaining the ban, the NRA has already succeeded once in getting the House to vote to repeal it. Encouraged by that partial victory, the NRA this year has made opposition to extending the ban a criterion on its political-candidate questionnaire.

Finally, there is the gun industry's grotesque romanticizing of snipers. The Violence Policy Center reported three years ago on a growing fascination with snipers in the United States, fueled by gun manufacturers who aggressively market military and police sniper rifles to civilians. The gun industry, the report said, was catering to a sniper subculture whose bloody motto is "One shot, one kill."

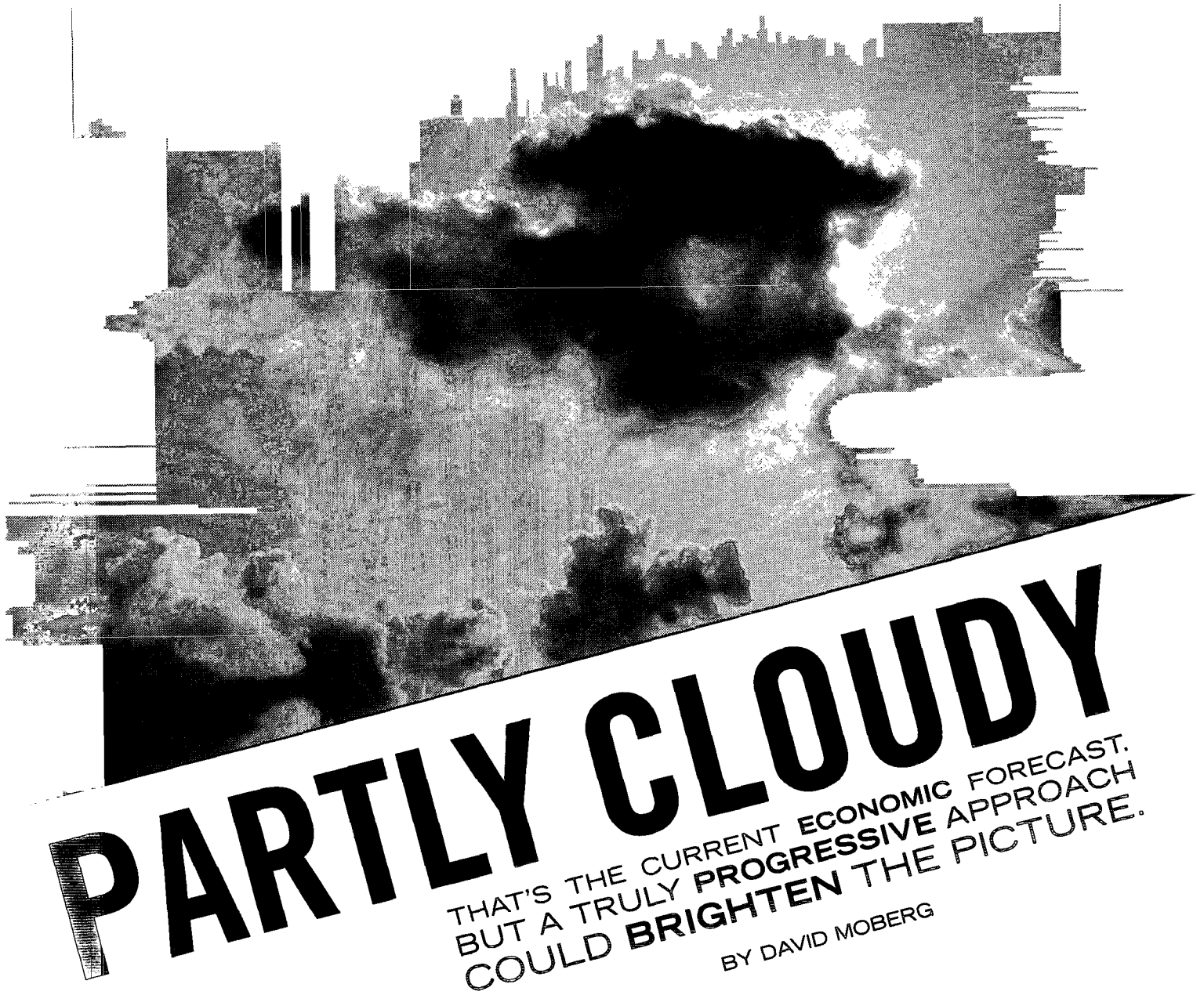
The gun lobby and their apologists are trying to shout down attempts at re-examining gun laws, wailing that people

Gun manufacturers aggressively market military and police sniper rifles to civilians.

raising the issue are simply exploiting the sniper rampage. But that argument, as Nosanchuk puts it, "is like saying after 9/11, we're not going to talk about airport security."

While everyone understands there may well be no law that could have prevented the sniper murders, recent events do offer an opportunity for a vigorous, rational debate on gun laws. We should hope that such a debate will not be dominated by paranoid fanatics and the elected officials who pander to them. ■

Rick Mercier is viewpoints editor of the Free Lance-Star in Fredericksburg, Virginia. He can be reached at mercier@freelancestar.com.



PARTLY CLOUDY

THAT'S THE CURRENT ECONOMIC FORECAST.
BUT A TRULY PROGRESSIVE APPROACH
COULD BRIGHTEN THE PICTURE.

BY DAVID MOBERG

All year long Democrats hoped that a sinking economy would lift them to victory in the polls this fall. As for the Republicans, humorists at *The Onion* summed it up best with this headline: "Bush on Economy: 'Saddam Must Be Overthrown.'"

Worries about the economy were indeed prominent on voters' minds, despite the administration's weapons of mass distraction. But Democrats failed to present a sufficiently forceful and cohesive message about what they would do differently.

The cloudy economic picture complicates matters. The U.S. economy has been growing slowly this year, the unemployment rate unexpectedly tapered off slightly in late summer, and there was another stock market rebound in October. But troubling signs—including four straight months of decline in the index of leading economic indicators—still overwhelm positive news. Even if economic growth doesn't decline further, the best

prospects are for slow growth, which will leave the economy fragile and unemployment high.

The stock market collapse, the continuing waves of corporate scandals and the prospect of war have left both investors and consumers jittery. But the most worrisome danger is that some shock, such as the collapse of a big bank, could push the economy into a deflationary spiral. With prices falling and interest rates near zero, consumers would delay purchases, waiting for lower prices. Deflation would further reduce the value of many assets, increase debt burdens, and make it impossible for the Federal Reserve to stimulate the economy, since it couldn't push interest rates below zero percent. A Japan-style deflationary slump in the United States would further drag down the global economy. This country has been the primary motor for the past decade, and neither faltering Europe nor Japan could take its place.

Consumers have sustained modest growth by increasing their debt, taking advantage of lower interest rates to buy homes and cars, refinancing existing mortgages to get cash, and loading up credit cards. But according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, growing numbers of workers are involuntarily unemployed or working part-time, duration of unemployment is lengthening, and as many as 3 million workers may be without unemployment benefits at the end of the year. Last year, poverty increased, the poor became even poorer, median household income fell, and inequality reached record levels (as income declined for every group except for the wealthiest 5 percent).

Not surprisingly, household defaults on debt are rising sharply. This would be worrisome on its own; the buffer for most households has been rising home prices. But Dean Baker, co-director of the Center for Economic and Policy Research, argues that the housing market is experiencing an unsustainable bubble.

Sensing that they might win total control of Congress, the Republicans and their business cronies began talking about an ideological economic agenda.

Consequently, if housing prices decline, household debt burdens will be less manageable, and consumer demand will drop.

Meanwhile, corporations have already cut back on investment—the steepest and longest decline since the Great Depression, says *The Economist*. Earnings are still depressed, and businesses are saddled with extraordinarily heavy debt. Some of that debt went into investments, such as telecommunications, that have since tanked. Many corporations also squandered their resources in the merger boom of the late '90s; a *Business Week* analysis shows that 61 percent of those mergers have failed, enriching top executives but destroying shareholders' wealth and leaving the companies less able to invest. Many key industries—information technology, telecommunications, airlines and large swaths of manufacturing—are in deep trouble, with major firms in or near bankruptcy.

In the wake of revelations about widespread corporate corruption and the exploitation of a vast array of "financial innovations," as the apologists call them, to enrich top managers and conceal poor performance, some high-profile businesses have collapsed. But the related fallout from financial deregulation continues to threaten banking and financial services.

Many industries have vastly more capacity to produce goods or services than they have customers, and that in turn depresses both prices and investment. As a result, even in Silicon Valley, the *Financial Times* reported, there have been widespread cutbacks in research and development, which threatens the growth of the most innovative sector of the U.S. economy.

Meanwhile, many businesses, facing rapidly rising health care costs, have shifted the cost to their employees. As a result, people will pay more for health care (or lose insurance) and have

less to spend on other needs. And businesses that had relied on a rising stock market to fund fixed-benefit pensions now face big new costs for those plans. The end result of all this: Businesses will have less money and motivation to invest, eliminating one important cause of the late-'90s boom.

Slow growth also depresses tax receipts. The federal budget went from a surplus, excluding Social Security, of \$86.6 billion in 2000 to a deficit of \$322 billion for fiscal year 2002. Democrats opportunistically—and misleadingly—bash Bush on this point. Running a deficit, along with the Fed lowering interest rates, is the right policy. But it would be better social and economic policy for deficits to finance tax cuts for low-income people, not the rich. Also, speedy deficit spending that improves productivity—for education, research or infrastructure—is better than tax cuts. Such targeted spending provides short- and long-term benefits, and it is less likely to be drained away in consumption of imports.

State governments face a bigger tax problem, with projected deficits of more than \$57 billion for fiscal year 2003. They can't run deficits because few have large reserves; and federal tax cuts—which many states mimic—made a bad situation worse. As a result, most states have cut work forces and essential services, including education, child care and Medicaid. Such policies deepen the downturn, hurt the most vulnerable and undermine future economic prospects.

The global context simply makes matters worse. Over the past year, the nation's trade deficit has sharply increased, as has its current accounts deficit (which includes investment income). Exports have declined, while imports—especially from China—have increased. The deficit partly reflects economic weakness throughout much of the rest of the world—as well as demand for the dollar, which is held by other countries as a reserve currency and is used in much of global trade and finance. But the strong dollar makes imports cheaper and U.S. exports more expensive.

The deficit puts the greatest pressure on manufacturing jobs. Economic Policy Institute economist Robert Scott calculates that the increase in the trade deficit from 1994 to 2000 created, after subtracting export-generated jobs, a net loss of 3 million job opportunities. Since 1998, the United States has lost 2.2 million manufacturing jobs—and nearly 1 million since September 2001—including one-fifth of auto and metal-working jobs and one-fourth of textile jobs, according to the AFL-CIO. Much of that loss resulted from import pressure and capital flight.

The International Monetary Fund this fall described the U.S. deficits as "unsustainable" and a source of economic instability. Worries about the stability of the U.S. economy, or the value of the dollar, could cause a sudden flight from the dollar, a drastic drop in its value, higher interest rates, and, consequently, a deeper, global recession. Because the world operates on a dollar standard, this is unlikely to happen soon—but in the late '60s, there was such a flight from the dollar to gold, leading to the demise of the Bretton Woods monetary system.

Sensing they might win total control of Congress, Republicans and their business cronies began talking openly in October about an economic agenda extracted from an ideological mold (even if it will be falsely sold as stimulating the economy). They want to accelerate Bush's tax cut, make it permanent, and abolish the estate tax. They also want to cut capital-gains taxes, increase deductions for investment losses, eliminate the "double taxation" of corporate dividends, and perhaps adopt a regressive national sales (or value-added) tax and a flat income tax.

These tax cuts would be an enormous giveaway to corporations and the rich with little stimulative benefit. From 2001 to 2005, the richest 1 percent of households will garner 19.8 percent of the tax cuts Congress approved last year, according to Citizens for Tax Justice. But they will get even more in the final phase of the 10-year Bush plan, so that by 2010, that elite 1 percent of households—making \$518,000 a year or more—will reap 52 percent of the benefits. Speeding up Bush's cuts and making them permanent would give them much more, much faster, much longer. That would deprive the public of needed resources while intensifying the inequality that has continued to rise even through the late '90s, when nearly full employment finally boosted real wages in the lower-income ranks.

The Bush administration has showed little interest in tackling the issues of corporate accountability. It underfunded the Securities and Exchange Commission, sabotaged appointment of a respected reformer as head of the new corporate accounting oversight board, and retreated on proposals to establish financial research operations independent of the big investment banks in order to reduce conflicts of interest on Wall Street.

Democrats, though hardly united, have at least promoted extensions of unemployment benefits, a higher minimum wage, aid for school construction, and federal assistance to states for Medicaid and to the unemployed for health insurance. House Democratic leader Dick Gephardt does advocate a \$75 billion tax cut "to help working families and encourage company investment," but Democratic leaders have been unwilling to call for repealing the remainder of Bush's tax cuts.

What would a truly progressive plan look like? It would include repeal of those future tax cuts, reduced interest rates, more revenue sharing with the states (for needs like childcare), and a simplified, more accessible family tax credit (incorporating the Earned Income

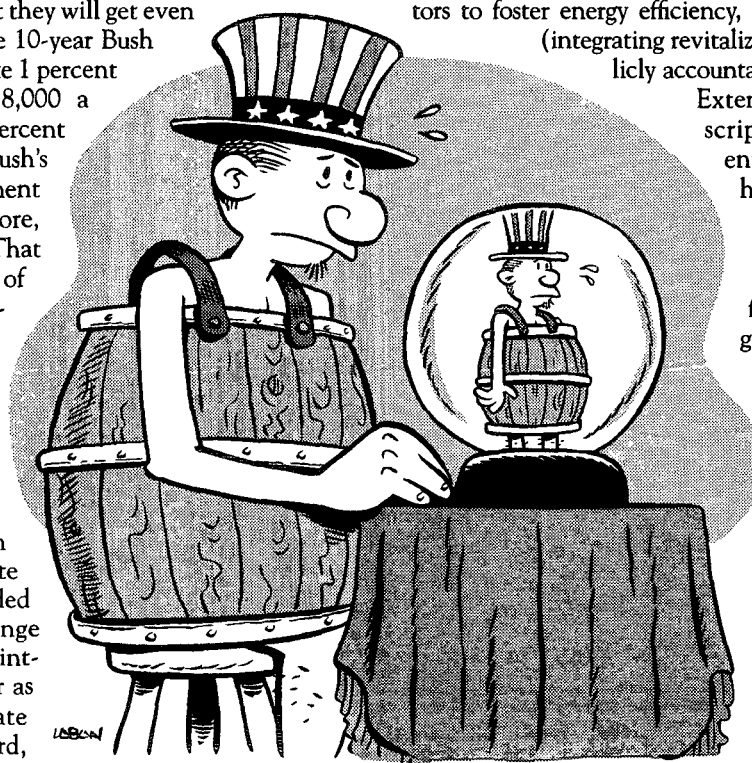
Tax Credit). It would also include more ambitious investments in long-term needs that would have immediate counter-cyclical effects. For example, besides building more schools, the federal government should invest more in research, provide more college scholarships, and offer displaced workers extensive education and training.

The federal government also needs to drastically democratize and reform corporate governance and regulate the financial-services industry to ensure greater openness, honesty and stability. That would also involve some credit allocation, like eliminating the mortgage interest tax credit for second homes and part of the cost of super-luxury homes (or, as the Federal Reserve should have done, restraining borrowing for stock speculation). There's also a need for renewed but reformed regulation of other deregulated sectors to foster energy efficiency, a rational transportation system (integrating revitalized rail transport), and more publicly accountable communications systems.

Extending Medicare, including prescription drug coverage, to the entire population would improve health and cut costs. Besides giving workers a stronger voice in their workplace savings plans and protecting Social Security from privatization, the federal government should encourage more universal, fixed-benefit pension plans that could be moved from job to job. Vigorous protection of workers rights to organize unions is also critical for making corporations more accountable and reducing inequality.

Globally, there is a need for stronger agreements that roll back excessive corporate rights and protect workers and the environment. But there also needs to be a greater emphasis on raising standards of living in developing countries and on reining in the excesses of the global financial system (starting with more controls on capital mobility and less fluctuation of exchange rates, as economists Christian Weller and Laura Singleton of the Economic Policy Institute have advocated).

These proposals go far beyond short-term stimuli for a sluggish economy, but the recent downturn is partly a product of the decades-long shift toward a deregulated, globalized economy dominated by the interests of financial markets and multinational corporations. Though Democrats share responsibility for creating this system, it serves neither their political needs nor the American public. If Democrats hope to win popular confidence in their economic stewardship, they must explain clearly and forcefully that the current system is a failure which serves only the rich—and that a bold, new approach, drawing on the best of progressive traditions, can make the economy work much better for the average American. ■



Election Daze

The Help America
Vote Act may do
just the opposite

By John Nichols

The most incredible thing about the 2000 presidential election debacle was not that the wrong guy "won." Any serious scholar of electoral politics will tell you this actually happens more frequently than most Americans have been led to believe.

Neither is it all that incredible that, after securing his "win," the wrong guy proceeded to govern as if he had been elected by a landslide, rather than as the product of a dubious 5-to-4 mandate from a conflict-of-interested Supreme Court. Getting away with the subversion of democracy at election time tends to inspire confidence in the culprits.

No, the incredible thing is that, with all that has been revealed about the chaotic, corruption-prone and chronically underfunded electoral process, Americans will return to the polls on November 5 without having made even minimal steps to address this crisis of democracy. The measures of the failure are many, but the most dramatic came in mid-October, when the Washington-based Center for Democracy—which historically has worked with emerging democracies such as Russia and Guatemala to establish effective electoral systems—announced it would for the first time monitor an election in the United States.



Congress failed to heed the lessons of the 2000 election fiasco.

Following a disastrous September 10 primary election in which closed polling places, non-functioning voting machines and fouled-up registration lists appear to have disenfranchised thousands of Florida voters—and called into question the result of the Democratic primary for governor—Miami-Dade County asked the Center for Democracy to send in as many as 20 experts to try and get things straightened out for November.

But Miami-Dade is just one of more than 3,000 American counties. And in the vast majority of them, little in the way of meaningful reform has taken place. Thus there is every reason to believe that, as in 2000, millions of American adults who want to vote will be denied the right to do so, and millions who do vote will not have their ballots counted for the candidate they intended to elect. “We still have not even guaranteed that people have a right to vote—the most basic right of all in a democracy,” says Rep. Jesse Jackson Jr. (D-Illinois). “I honestly do not know how we say that we respect democracy, that we are willing to go to war to defend democracy, but as a country we have such trouble making the defense of democracy at home a priority.”

Jackson is promoting a simple measure that would rectify most of what ails American democracy—a constitutional amendment to guarantee the right to vote and the right to have votes counted. But don’t expect it to pass anytime soon.

The best that Congress has been able to accomplish in the two years since shenanigans in Florida prevented Al Gore from becoming president has been a reform plan that may not even be in place in time for the 2004 presidential election. And, depending on whom you listen to, the so-called Help America Vote Act of 2002—which was cobbled together by a House-Senate conference committee and then passed by overwhelming votes in both chambers in early October (and is awaiting President Bush’s signature)—might actually make things worse.

That is not, of course, how leaders of Congress and most of the media have been “spinning” the new law. In their desperation to claim that they had actually done something to repair the obviously decaying and in some cases destroyed democratic structures of America, even members of Congress who know better have been busily patting themselves on the back for ushering in an era of reform. “Election Day 2000 was not a proud day for our democracy, but that day was also a gift,” declares Sen. Chris Dodd (D-Connecticut), the reasonably liberal chairman of the Senate Rules Committee, who really did try for a time to enact sweeping reforms. “Had there never been a contested election, the problems likely would never have been addressed.”

Republican opposition to many of the most needed reforms slowed progress to a halt for the better part of a year, however, and only when Dodd and others agreed to serious compromises was the legislation enacted. Still, recalling the 2000 crisis, Dodd argues that the Help America Vote Act “goes a long way toward righting those wrongs.”

Dodd and other Democratic backers of the legislation celebrate its positive aspects:

- It allows registered voters to cast “provisional ballots” even if their names are excluded from voter registration lists provided to poll workers. The provisional ballot can then be counted if confusion regarding registration is later resolved.
- It requires states to develop and maintain centrally managed voter registration lists designed to ensure the accuracy of and consistency of standards in voter registration records.
- It requires states to guarantee that in every polling place there is at least one voting machine that is accessible to the disabled.
- It requires that states ensure that voters can verify and correct votes before casting them, a provision that could rectify the problem that came to light in November 2000,

‘We still have not even guaranteed that people have a right to vote—the most basic right of all in a democracy.’

when Palm Beach County, Florida, voters knew they had mistakenly cast confused “butterfly” ballots for Reform Party candidate Pat Buchanan rather than their actual choice, Al Gore, but could not change the mistake.

- It sets up mechanisms for getting as much as \$3.8 billion in federal money to election supervisors over the next three years, so that they can purchase better equipment, develop improved registration lists and train election officials and poll workers.

Dodd’s optimistic view of the new law’s potential to set things right is echoed by the measure’s Republican co-sponsor, Kentucky’s Mitch McConnell, the scourge of campaign finance reformers and one of the least likely leaders for democratic renewal. But their enthusiasm is not shared by civil rights and civil liberties activists. As Wade Henderson, executive director of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights notes, “The final House-Senate agreement on election reform contains a number of badly needed improvements.” The problem, he explains, is that “it takes several steps backward as well.”

In a scathing analysis of the legislation’s flaws, Laura W. Murphy and LaShawn Y. Warren of the American Civil Liberties Union wrote: “This legislative cure to the severe voting rights problems seen in the 2000 presidential election could be even worse than the disease. In many respects, the conference report rolls back many of the voting rights victories achieved over the past three decades. ... Instead of making sure that the voting process is as inclusive as possible, this agreement would exclude people, negatively impacting the elderly, the disabled, racial and ethnic minorities, students and the poor. Not only would this bill make it more difficult to vote, it would make it more difficult to register to vote.”

Even the League of Women Voters, a group rarely known for its radicalism, is concerned. According to President Kay Maxwell, the legislation “weakens and undercuts several of the hard-fought voter protections established in current law.”

For example, the Privacy Act of 1974 makes it unlawful for local, state or federal agencies to deny individuals a right provided by law if those individuals refuse to disclose to authorities their Social Security number. Yet the Help America Vote Act requires that citizens seeking to register to vote provide a driver’s license number or, if they are among the millions of adult Americans who do not have a license, to disclose the last four digits of their Social Security number. As the ACLU notes, “Any voter who has either number but does not provide it—even for privacy reasons—would not be registered.”

Another provision in the new law requires first-time voters to produce specific forms of identification, with a clear prejudice toward photo identification. This rule, a favorite of House Republicans, conflicts with the National Voter Registration Act, which prohibits requirements that driver’s licenses or Social Security numbers be used to authenticate voter registration forms. It is also dramatically biased against people of color and low-income Americans. A 1994 Department of Justice study conducted in Louisiana found that African-Americans were four to five times less likely than white citizens to have driver’s licenses or other forms of official identification that include photos. And the Federal Election Commission in 1997 noted that, because obtaining and maintaining photo identification can be costly, such requirements create undue and potentially discriminatory burdens for Americans seeking to exercise their right to vote. So great is the burden that it could even amount to a violation of the Voting Rights Act, according to a number of analysts.

The identification requirements are just some of the new hoops that the bill requires citizens to leap through. At the behest of Republican negotiators, the House-Senate conference committee added a mandate that new voters check off a box on registration forms confirming their citizenship. If the box is left unchecked, by mistake or because a local election official fails to point out the new requirement, the state is prevented from registering the voter. “The need for this additional ‘check off’ box is highly questionable and it is obvious that the detrimental consequences, intended or not, will be visited upon Hispanic and Asian-American communities,” argues Raul Yzaguirre, president of the National Council of La Raza, an umbrella organization of more than 270 Hispanic groups.

Even the good the law might do is elusive. The legislation fails to address fundamental concerns arising from the Florida fight of 2000. For instance:

- It does not guarantee that necessary funding will actually be allocated in a timely fashion—or at all. “The real impact of the new law will be determined by its implementation,” says Henderson. “Many of these changes will be meaningless until Congress actually delivers on the funding.” Considering the budget deficits Congress will be looking at when it returns after this election, there are no guarantees that the dollars will flow from Washington to where they are needed.

- It doesn’t bar the sort of voter registration list “maintenance” activities that Florida Secretary of State Katherine Harris’ office used to knock the names of thousands of eligible voters of polling lists in a “felon purge.” More significantly, the legislation fails to enforce any sort of uniform standard for allowing ex-offenders who have “done their time” to again participate in American democracy. Fourteen states still maintain laws, generally legacies of the segregation era, which deny the right to vote to people who have been convicted of felonies. According to a Sentencing Project study, African-American men are disenfranchised at seven times the national average under these laws. In Florida, 31 percent of African-American men are still denied the right to vote because of this archaic form of discrimination.
- It establishes ridiculously weak enforcement provisions that rely entirely on Attorney General John Ashcroft’s Department of Justice to enforce the voter protections in the federal courts. According to an analysis by the Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the new legislation is written so as to “deny aggrieved voters the ability to seek a remedy in our nation’s courts.”
- It doesn’t establish any real parameters for whether provisional ballots will be counted. Thus, as the ACLU notes, “although this legislation requires election officials to permit a voter whose name does not appear on the voter registration list to cast a provisional ballot, it gives complete discretion to the state to decide when and if provisional ballots will be counted, even in federal elections. As we have seen in the past, these ballots can determine the outcome of an election.”
- It establishes minimum standards for voter machinery but then includes an exemption for the sort of punch-card machines that created some of the most severe problems in the 2000 Florida voting—preventing tens of thousands of ballots from being counted for the candidate the voter intended. In fact, the legislation is thick with exemptions and waivers that call into question whether most of the law’s protections will ever be made real in the regions where those protections are most needed.
- And, of course, it does not begin to address rapidly declining rates of voter participation, which have seen turnout levels dip to record lows as citizens choose not to leap registration and voting barriers because, increasingly, they do not see their vote as mattering much in a money-driven, winner-take-all system where voting minorities get little respect and, as Florida proved, the system cannot even deliver on the promise of majority rule.

So, two years after Florida made George W. Bush president, the radical revamping of a failed electoral system that seemed like such an obvious—and necessary—response has yet to come. And the promise of democratic renewal that some saw in the crisis of 2000 remains a dream deferred. ■

*John Nichols is the author of *Jews for Buchanan, an analysis of the 2000 Florida presidential vote and its aftermath*. His new book, with Robert W. McChesney, is *Our Media, Not Theirs*.*

The Big Picture

By Joshua Rothkopf

So it looks like the movies made it. Made it through the “death of irony” we heard so much about last year; made it through the countless other obituaries issued by fashionably black pundits, dating as far back as the introduction of sound. They have survived congressional grumblings during election years, the big-screen debuts of both Madonna and Britney Spears, and appear to be holding up nicely against the skittering encroachments of the digerati—some of whom have even been invited to join the club.

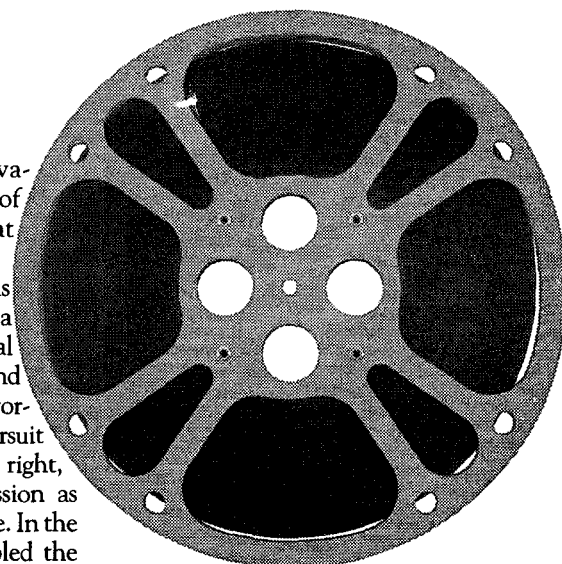
And judging from the numbers posted by multiplexes and sold-out festival screenings alike, we seem to want them more than ever, perhaps even despite themselves. (I’ve learned never to argue with a Jedi master in a year when his Holiness dislodges another episode from the Ranch.) Amazingly, the spirit of film seems ever-willing; it’s a straw man’s argument to build a case for cinema’s irrelevancy out of audience apathy or—as tempting as it might be for us planners—the

ema; both require patient cultivation and the sober consideration of all parties vested in seeing that future guaranteed.

Such is the core essence of this special film issue of *In These Times*, a magazine committed to the critical examination of systemic failures and grassroots solutions. Cinema is a worthy subject for such analysis; the pursuit of culture, an invaluable human right, deserves the same vigorous discussion as matters of statecraft and global abuse. In the pages that follow, we have assembled the opinions of several of our cultural correspondents, reporting on—and in one case, from—the front lines of cinema’s most promising activity, from underrepresented regions on the map to more theoretical battlegrounds of subject and genre. All of these writers share in the dream of cinema’s greater enrichment; all offer different proposals toward that end.

A quiet phenomenon happened in America this year, one that merits both attention and pause. A modest independent picture opened in April to an initial critical response that could safely be described as lukewarm. But that didn’t stop its distributors from knuckling down, carefully growing the film from city to city, listening to word of mouth, tending to interest. In six month’s time, they had done more than break even; they actually had a hit—a big, fat, Greek hit. At \$170 million and counting, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* is, with the possible exception of *The Blair Witch Project* (which technically had some studio assistance with its promotion), the most commercially successful independent film of all time.

Which is really saying something, because the movie pretty much bores the pants off people, particularly those young, ticket-buying males so coveted by the studios. The producers simply went around them to a different demographic—parents (and grandparents)—and it worked. The point here is not the blandification of tastes (though *Wedding* does go down as smoothly and innocuously as mac-and-cheese, not souvlaki as you might imagine), nor is it the obsolescence of film



criticism. After all, a certain kind of criticism was employed: an unpretentious vouching of merits from friend to friend, from publicist to small theater booking agent. Such application makes you wonder if they might not have easily been selling cough drops or a foreign film, even one just as potentially boring to teen-age boys.

Which brings me to the other phenomenon of 2002, the unspooling of a movie as artistically accomplished and thematically profound as any in years, maybe in a decade. From the point of view of sheer craft, the film has no equal: It’s composed, thrillingly, of a single uninterrupted shot, winding its way around hundreds of performers and dozens of rooms. It has the eerie pull of a ghost story, narrated by a disembodied voice from the future who may be mourning his own death as well as the demise of his homeland. It practically chokes with beauty, decay and a sense of nostalgia so ultimately moving, it has brought festival audiences to their feet in rapture.

But will *Russian Ark* ever gross \$170 million? Not likely; one must concede the brute appeal of lovers in bloom and flaming plates of cheese. And only wishful thinkers could possibly demand the instantaneous nationwide saturation that so many other movies receive as a matter of course. (One can’t coherently trumpet a film for its subtle complexities and also expect it to cry out its enticements to the casual viewer.) But isn’t it high time the connoisseurs of art cinema took a page out of *Wedding*’s playbook? Regarding *Russian Ark*, there are czarist history buffs to

Whether to bring a film to an audience or an audience to a film—that is the question.

failure of highly paid storytellers. As always, we live in a time of hackwork and great mastery, both at home and abroad. Significant new waves are just now cresting in countries like Iran and Japan, while our own *éminence grise*, Martin Scorsese, toils to complete (and defend from studio trimming) his most moneyed and ambitious film to date, *Gangs of New York*. Again, business as usual.

What is at stake is the nature of the conduit: Whether to successfully bring a film to its audience or the audience to a film—that is the question. Anemic systems of distribution, often baldly prohibitive to foreign diversity, should give cause for alarm, as should the dearth of plain-spoken yet passionate advocacy for adventurous work, from media sources that could afford to be more courageous. Both elements are essential to the survival of a vibrant cin-

Inside the *Russian Ark*: Cinema will survive as surely as the Hermitage.

mobilize, art history departments to target (it's shot in the Hermitage). And would it hurt the bowled-over critics to take a step back from their sophisticated references to consider the pivotal role they might be playing if they only pitched a review to intelligent readers with no background in cinema or Russian studies at all?

Movies like *Russian Ark* will always be a hard sell; so are many of the films to be discussed in the essays that follow. But palpable enthusiasm is the first step, communication of that excitement the second. We already have so many other obstacles to overcome, as sadly demonstrated by the recent inability of Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami to obtain a visa in time to attend the American premiere of his latest film, *10*. It's important to note this was not a denial of his application (as was widely misreported), nor an outright condemnation of Kiarostami's work. (That comes after the war begins.) It was, at root, a



failure to communicate the importance of this humanitarian artist to a body that could have exempted him from strict new screening procedures, but chose not to.

Perhaps no amount of skillful reasoning could have swayed our gatekeepers from their ignorance. But as Kiarostami himself suggested in his dignified statement to the press, the embarrassment is also his, and by extension our own. We must try harder to convince, go further to embrace the

cultural visions of the world. Kiarostami's films will survive the waylaying of a visa, the "death of irony," even the deaths of thousands. But none will survive the death of hope essential to all cineastes—the hope that pools whenever the theater darkens, and of which we have a duty to convey when the lights come back up. ■

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Iran Behind the Screen

By Merhnaz Saeed-Vafa

Women and cinema are controversial, problematic and significant topics in modern Iran, a nation that benefits from an unexpectedly rich film tradition, as well as the active participation of women in all areas of society, including filmmaking.

But to what extent are the portrayals of Iranian women in film close to reality? In the absence of other venues of literary and cultural information, Iranian movies have become a pivotal source of reference for Western viewers, who often politicize the films well beyond their original intentions, reading images and gestures as highly charged symbols. In a country like Iran, which has been undergoing a thorough cultural transformation and identity crisis, the evolving image of women is an important issue. Obviously, censorship and the dominant male view, as well as social, cultural and religious taboos, have all played significant roles in allowing cer-

tain female characters to appear onscreen while keeping the rest off.

Women have been depicted as incomplete, unreal, idealized—in short, marginalized—for a number of years, for reasons mainly to do with the conservative condition of Iran after the revolution. Challenging these reductive images of women are the women themselves, with their increasing representation in many venues, notably film production. A review of the past two decades of Iranian cinema and its social and cultural history will throw some light on this issue of women and their relationship to the screen, both in front of and behind the camera. When did they start to appear in film—and why? And where they are now?

Right after the revolution, Hollywood films were banned, and Iranian filmmakers were instructed to make films to educate and promote

moral values and the revolutionary spirit. A film's script, its talent, crew, director and final release all had to be approved by the Ministry of Islamic Guidance. Their new set of codes and standards, established in 1982, provided specific guidelines and policy for all areas of film production. For example, women were to appear only in *hejab* (Islamic dress code) and not make any physical contact with male actors. Themes and characters disrespecting or violating the values of Islam and revolution were forbidden.

These standards all but implied a cinema that had to be didactic, since its goal was to purify the minds of audiences and the movie culture in general from "corruptive" images that would promote "wrong and evil." As a result, characters had to appear as good role models, especially women, traditionally treated as the carriers of honor for family, community and nation. They

had to emerge as selfless mothers, obedient wives and pious daughters.

A natural implication of these policies was an inherent denial of existing social ills. Prostitution, alcoholism, drug addiction, domestic violence, rebellious children, marital infidelity, confused characters, sinners and political dissidents were all absent and removed from movies produced in the early '80s. Many filmmakers began to censor themselves, not only to stay away from trouble, but to avoid the artificiality of scenes of domestic intimacy where married women had to be covered at all times and refrain from any kind of physical contact with their husbands. As a result, private scenes with women were replaced by public ones; the exterior situation of a woman took over her interior struggle.

But for the most part, directors avoided female roles altogether. With the exception of Bahram Bayzaie, who often cast women in strong leading roles in films like *Bashu, the Little Stranger* (1985), other established directors offered work almost completely peopled by men: Abbas Kiarostami's *First Graders* (1984), Dariush Mehrjui's *The School We Went To* (1980), Amir Naderi's *Runner* (1984) and Mohsen Makhmalbaf's *Boycott* (1985).

Another factor was the eight-year war with Iraq, beginning in 1980, a year after the revolution. With national and ideological concepts of sovereignty threatened, the function of movies became even more significant in controlling the social spirit; the hardships of the war gave birth to "sacred defense cinema"—war films poised to reflect the concerns of the day. Many documentary and narrative films were made during this period with soldiers (and martyrs) as their central characters.

The roles for women in these films were non-existent or minimal at best, limited to the mothers of the soldiers and martyrs; these were the first parts for women on Iranian screens. In the absence of wives, glorified mothers were accepted almost immediately, a tradition that continues to this day in Bahman Farmanara's recent *Smell of Camphor, Fragrance of Jasmine* (2000), with its idealized mute mother worshiped by a loving son. (Notably breaking from this tradition is

Kiarostami's latest, *10*, in which a divorcee is constantly cursed at by her son, who blames her for their problems.)

Other variations include the mother as financial burden, as in Alireza Davudnejad's *The Need* (1992), and the mother as troubling preoccupation, as in

Challenging the reductive images of women in Iran are Iranian women themselves.

Makhmalbaf's *Marriage of the Blessed* (1988), in which a tortured-soul war hero constantly worries about his mother and wife, far from his world of revolutionary ideals. But the strong, nourishing mother, in tune with nature, as seen in *Bashu, the Little Stranger*, is the model: the ultimate source of comfort, love, security and identity. To what extent mothers are substitutes for wives or single women I'll leave for another discussion, noting as well the young boys that often replace adult men: Kamal Tabrizi's *Mother's Love* (1997) has an orphan boy longing to be adopted by his young female social worker.

With the exhaustive war taking its toll, the latter half of the '80s and early '90s saw a new demand for lighter fare; family melodramas and comedies

surfaced, as well as a few films that questioned the war. Consequently, wives and sisters materialized as characters. The Westernized young women of Ebrahim Hatamikia's *From Kharkheh to Rhein* (1993), *Scent of Joseph's Shirt* (1995) and *Minoo Tower* (1995), sisters of Islamic militant brothers, are good examples of these new roles. The increasing emergence of women on both sides of the camera is very noticeable, as seen in Makhmalbaf's industry documentary, *Salaam Cinema* (1994). Actresses such as Nicki Karimi, Fatemah Motamed-Aria and Roya Nonahali launched the beginnings of a new star system, their beautiful young faces (always framed by veils) attracting many to the theaters on top of their talents.

A period of high commercialization in Iranian cinema, these years coincided with the government's withdrawal from subsidizing most films, and a subsequent economic depression that forced producers to resort to sensational melodrama to secure the box office. Behrooz Afkhami's *The Bride* (1991) brought to the screen a version of (relative) eroticism so unsurpassed that for a while, it became forbidden to shoot close-ups of women wearing makeup. The idealization of young women on screen seemed to spread overnight as the age of stars steadily decreased; Majid Majidi's later *Baran* (2000) broke the record by reducing the age of the beautiful-girl ideal to adolescence.

Major directors like Mehrjui turned to making films with women. *Hamoon*



I Am Taraneh, 15. But who's listening?

COURTESY OF GENE SISKEL FILM CENTER



The faces of women in *Bemani*.

(1989), *Banu* (1991) *Sara* (1992), *Pari* (1994), *Leila* (1996) and his recent *Bemani* (2002) are all concerned with the struggles of young women, often idealized. For example, *Sara*, who leaves her unappreciative husband behind her, taking the kids in tow, is the direct opposite of what we see in Ziba Mir Hosseini and Kim Longinotto's 1998 documentary *Divorce Iranian Style*, where the custody of children is automatically granted to men. The misery of *Sara*'s husband at the end of *Sara* is no match for his legal power in real life.

Makhmalbaf's *Gabbeh* (1995) celebrates the beauty of a young tribal woman without really accessing her inner world; idealized rural women with their colorful clothes and exotic natures emerged as a character type in '90s Iranian cinema. Kiarostami's *Through the Olive Trees* (1993) critiques this idealization; in one scene, a director asks a village girl to wear her traditional clothes, but she insists on wearing modern dress.

Increasingly, male Iranian filmmakers were demonstrating an appreciation for the women's movement and an awareness of international sympathies: Fereydoon Jayrani's *Red* (1998) concerns itself with a young woman who daringly attacks a man who is threatening her. *Bride of Fire* (2000), directed by Khosrow Sinai, is about an educated and modernized tribal woman who challenges her arranged marriage. Echoing the increasingly mobilized voice of Iran's students, Ahmad Reza Darvish's *Born in September* (2000) depicts the clashes of a young college student with her conservative father as she fights for her liberal ideals—including her leaving home to follow the man she loves.

But the most important breakthroughs arrived in the work of two women directors emerging in the late '80s,

Tahmineh Milani and Rakshan Bani-Etemad. Milani's controversial *Two Women* (1998) contrasts the sugar-coated marital delusions of a well-to-do woman architect with those of her friend, trapped in a miserable marriage with a controlling, paranoid man. With this film, Milani introduced to the Iranian cinema the previously unexplored subject of a women's identity in marriage.

Bani-Etemad, coming to features from a long career in documentary filmmaking, brings an expertise of the social concerns of working-class women. Her masterpiece *Nargess* (1991) portrays a young woman married to a thief; her strong will and goodness become his salvation. Bani-Etemad skillfully explores issues of unemployment, relationships outside of marriage and the sisterly bond between two women in love with the same man. Her most recent feature, *Under the Skin of the City* (2000), goes even further into realism, depicting the tribulations of a working-class mother bravely facing her family's problems, which include domestic violence, drug addiction and more minor crimes.

By this point, Bani-Etemad and Milani were not alone, with other women filmmakers entering the field and, in the case of Marzieh Meshkini's poetic *The Day I Became a Woman* (2000), even finding American distribution.

More than 20 years after the revolution, the rougher edges of female desperation finally begin to find their expression: Rasul Sadr-Ameli's *Girl in the Sneakers* (1998) shows a young girl running away from home to be with her cowardly boyfriend, only to become disappointed by his hypocrisy. Sadr-Ameli's follow-up film, *I Am Taraneh*, 15 (2002), concerns itself with the plight of a teenage single mother challenging the legal and social system of Iranian family law.

Sweet Agony (1998), by Alireza Davudnejad, focuses on the love between a boy and a girl in their teens, an affair in defiance of religious orthodoxy. The subject of prostitution emerges in Seyyed Reza Mir-Karimi's *Under the Moonlight* (2000), Jafar Panahi's *The Circle* (2000) and Manighe Hekmat's *Women's Prison* (2002).

But images of Iranian women can remain problematic in their cinematic portrayal as mere types and not characters. In the interests of serving a message, even a feminist one, the films sometimes suffer: Alireza Raisian's *The Deserted Station* (2002) mysteriously plops its well-dressed, middle-class woman in the middle of nowhere to deal with village children. All the audience is allowed to learn of motivation comes from her appearance. Similarly so with Babak Payami's *Secret Ballot* (2002), which follows a young urban woman collecting votes with a soldier. The woman remains a type and never develops into a full character, either due to Payami's interest in a metaphoric language or lack of interest in his characters.

But certain directors have still managed to be both conceptual and dramatic, taking care of people as well as the message. Kiarostami has a unique style of creating lively characters with insightfully observed detail, and his example has inspired such young filmmakers as Samira Makhmalbaf, whose *The Apple* (1998) is a uniquely realistic portrait of young girls and their community. *Exam* (2002), by first-time director Nasser Refaie, is an impressionistic yet closely observed look at bold young women rarely found in other films. Bani-Etemad's aforementioned work has also pointed the way forward. These films—pioneered mainly by women—have signaled a sense of change and progress for women in Iran, both on and off the screen. ■

Merhnaz Saeed-Vafa is a filmmaker and professor at Columbia College Chicago. Her book on Abbas Kiarostami, co-authored with Jonathan Rosenbaum, is forthcoming in March.

Clash of the Titans

By Carl Bromley

Behold Hrithik Roshan! Bollywood dream boy! He of the satyr's face—pointy ears, aquiline nose, translucent greeny hazel eyes—that melts the hearts of women across the Indian subcontinent! Older women think he's such a "nice boy," though they worry if he's eating enough, while their daughters have spread him across their bedroom walls—in ubiquitous shades and a tank top barely hiding his finely muscled form—just as the ad industry has plastered his visage all over India.

There are few overnight sensations of Hrithik's kind. Plucked from relative obscurity by his film director father to appear in a movie that every big star had turned down, twinned with the equally obscure Amisha Patel (an econ grad from Tufts, no less), *Kaho Naa ... Pyaar Hai* ("Tell me ... You Love Me") opened two years ago with zero buzz to break almost every Indian box office record. Hrithik was soon cast with the immortal likes of Amitabh Bachchan (Big B, as close to a living

take long for his creditors to come calling for their cut. The Indian film magazines, perhaps the most bitchy in the world,



Devdas was the first Bollywood movie to screen at Cannes.

soon spread rumors that, contrary to the declared devotion to fiancé Suzanne, he was gallivanting in London with frequent co-star Kapoor. This was par for the course. (Amitabh once complained that these rumors come with the territory when you spend more time with your leading ladies than your wife.)

Then there were the two days of rioting in Nepal after it was alleged that Hrithik had dissed the Nepalese in a TV interview. Tires and trees were set ablaze, Katmandu was shut down, and four people died. (Hrithik insists he loves Nepal.) This too is par for the course. When Amitabh was mistakenly declared dead in 1982, India ground to a halt.

But what sent shockwaves through Bollywood was the attempted murder of Hrithik's father in broad daylight by gangsters alleged to be associates of Abu Salem, the Bombay underworld kingpin who is currently a fugitive. (Apparently Roshan Sr. hadn't paid protection money.) Hrithik's tribute to his father—angry, tender and emotional—at the Filmfare awards was very moving. And you had to ask yourself,

what's a nice boy like him doing in a business like this?

The failed assassination attempt unveiled Bollywood's scariest and most open secret—that the industry, so used to producing industrial-strength fantasy, had become the playground of gangsters. A slew of Bollywood's best and brightest have been subpoenaed to testify in the trial of a leading Bombay underworld figure and film financier.

It's common to hear that India's new gods are its film stars. Hindu imagery is indeed the dominant religio-cultural form in a vaguely secular industry (many of whose leading artistes are actually Muslim). Much is made of the enormous social power that celebrity confers on them, the mass adoration and enthusiasm they generate. This is not lost

on the political class, either. Two of Bollywood's biggest stars—Vinod Khanna and Shatrughan "Shotgun" Sinha—have just been handed, respectively, the Tourism and Health Ministry portfolios in India's federal cabinet. I remember being in southern India when Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran—or MGR, the former superstar of Tamil cinema turned chief minister of Tamil Nadu—died. The news anchor announced that a number of suicides had come in the wake of MGR's death. And before that, 22 people had killed themselves hoping their death might aid MGR's recovery.

But in a country where religious imagery and devotion is deeply embedded, and extreme Hindu fundamentalism is ascendant, the direction of worship flows both ways. The industry's leading lights shamelessly genuflect to Bal Thackeray, the czar of Bombay's terrifying Hindu chauvinist Shiv Sena Party and a confessed Hitler admirer. Shiv Sena controls the municipality, and Thackeray has become an important broker in the industry, ready to order his supporters to release snakes into movie theaters if he dislikes

India's massive film industry, so rich in genre, song, humor and irony, is finally going global. But is everyone happy about it?

demigod you get in India), rough, tough Sanjay Dutt, cheeky Shah Rukh Khan and cutie-pie Kareena Kapoor. In what must have been a first for GQ, the magazine profiled Hrithik, describing him as "the most famous person you have never heard of, one of the biggest movie stars in the world." He told GQ that he was ready to play James Bond.

If some kind of Faustian pact engineered Hrithik's rise to fame, it didn't

the film's content. Bollywood's film stars are mortal then, and yes, prey to the vicissitudes of fate: A recent issue of *Showtime* magazine screams: "Finished! Seven flops, overexposure and disastrous career moves finally spell the end of the Hrithik Roshan mania."

Hrithik's travails are a case of his life imitating his art. Perhaps the only thing stranger than off-screen Bollywood is what's up there on the big screen. There is nothing on earth like it. How to describe this strange film universe? Here are the usual clichés and fac-toids relayed by hacks: More films produced a year than Hollywood! Boy meets girl, boy and girl fall in love, but parents, class, caste and community don't approve! Bumbling but loveable servants! Overbearing mothers getting sentimental over their favorite sons! Domineering daddies who tell their daughters: "You will not marry that man!" Gaudy song-and-dance sequences of tenuous relevance to the plot! Films that go on for more than three hours! Biceps, midribs and wet saris galore! But no sex, no kissing and certainly no nudity!

Inevitably the word kitsch comes up. But Bollywood is finally going global, aided by the spread of the Indian diaspora, but also helped by a new Western interest. Baz Luhrmann has acknowledged that his *Moulin Rouge* is an homage to the Bollywood musical. Andrew Lloyd Webber has teamed with A.R. Rahman, the maestro of the Bollywood soundtrack, to pen *Bombay Dreams*, a theatrical salute to Bollywood. Last year's *Lagaan* was the first Bollywood movie to be nominated for an Oscar, while *Devdas*—the most expensive Indian film ever made—was the first to be selected to screen at Cannes.

Not everyone is happy with this development. *Film Comment* devoted an excellent issue to Bollywood that provoked this response on its letters page:

Just like Hollywood, the Bombay film industry and its mega-rich stars and corporate sponsors have caused immense damage to South Asia's

once-vibrant, socially conscious, progressive New Wave cinema. With its kitschy, sexist, out-of-this-world tales, Bollywood has delegitimized the egalitarian work of Shyam Benegal, Mrinal Sen, Girish Karnad and

video parlors, so we make films for them that will let them forget their lives for three hours. We create total fantasy, not the polished reality that Hollywood portrays.



Hrithik Roshan: Ready to play James Bond?

Adoor Gopalakrishnan. With its rampant violence and gun worship, it has destroyed the pacifist messages of Satyajit Ray and Ritwik Ghatak.

Bollywood has forced at least three generations of South Asian men and women to gulp down trash in the name of entertainment. Yet if only they knew it was there, these generations could easily find ambrosia. Alas, even the West doesn't care to know.

While I was trying to wake up and smell the ambrosia, I recalled a moment in Justine Hardy's book on the Bombay film industry, *Bollywood Boy*, when director Subhash Ghai berates her:

You talked of this industry as Bollywood. This is a very wrong thing to call it. We are not trying to copy Hollywood. We are making films for an audience of a billion people. Over 80 percent of these people don't have enough food in their bellies. Our country does not provide its people with pool halls, basketball courts and

Though at opposite ends, each of these statements reinforces the other. And while both reveal partial (and undeniable) truths about Bollywood—and all media—they only succeed in homogenizing an industry rich in genre, song, humor and irony.

Undoubtedly, there is something distasteful about how much contemporary romantic Hindi cinema celebrates the conspicuous consumption of a tiny elite. There is often a repellent nationalist undercurrent too, where all enemies, especially in action movies, have their origins "over the border" in Pakistan (though in an earlier, more populist period, the CIA was also invoked).

Still, the industry doesn't shirk political controversy. The treatment of Islamic fundamentalism and the Kashmiri insurgency in films like *Fiza* and *Mission Kashmir*—both of which star Hrithik as a dream boy Taliban—though in many respects political cop-outs, do at least acknowledge a history of state violence, repression and discrimination in India against religious minorities. Political corruption and class violence are also perennial themes.

My own 15-year journey through Bollywood has yielded strange and beautiful fruit: the classic (and revolutionary) Amitabh films of the '70s; the weepy and blissful melodramatics of *Aradhana*; the bubblegummy *Maine Pyar Kiya*; the action-packed *Insaaf*; Vidhu Vinod Chopra's *Parinda*, a brilliant reworking of the American gangster in a Bombay clime; Ashutosh Gowariker's spectacular, anti-imperialist cricket saga *Lagaan*; and Sanjay Leela Bhansali's gorgeous, gothic *Devdas*.

But Mani Ratnam's 1998 film *Dil Se* is the most notable. The story of an All-India Radio journalist (Shah Rukh Khan) who travels to northeast India to cover an insur-

rection and falls obsessively in love with a beautiful, enigmatic and standoffish woman (who may or may not be a terrorist) makes for a sublime cinematic experience. Rutnam is one of India's most innovative filmmakers, blending the conventions of Bollywood's grand style with an operatic art-house aesthetic. His fluid command of *mise-en-scène* is breathtaking; his song-and-dance sequences have a surreal, seductive and uncanny visual style, punctuated by A.R. Rahman's hallucinatory score. Like his earlier *Bombay*, this is a devastating film about sexual and emotional desire colliding with communal, political and religious identities.

Rather than going the way of other international film industries under Hollywood's assault, Bollywood's alternative cinematic universe is as vibrant as ever. It's as bright, gaudy and brash as the posters that ubiquitously dot the Bombay landscape, as politically complicated and messy as the country it belongs to. Its siren call is often irresistible, as I discovered myself as a teen-age visitor to Bombay's Seth Studios. As the actors appeared on set and repeated takes, slowly and surely stardust descended on me. ■

Carl Bromley is editor of Cinema Nation: The Best Writing on Film from The Nation, 1913-2000.

The Poetry of Trash

By Pat Aufderheide

When Agnès Varda, who some call the "mother of the French New Wave," made *The Gleaners and I* at the age of 72, she received more letters, mail and mementos than for any of the other films she has made in her long, illustrious and stubbornly individual career. That makes sense. The film calls forth that kind of response, with its intimate tone, rich characters, and warm respect for people who respond to the ordinary cruelty of the world with small gestures of resistance.

The Gleaners and I is a meditative and wandering essay that begins with the subject of waste and the people who use it, and goes on to ask questions, large and small, about inequality, injustice and suffering. Why are perfectly good potatoes junked, just for being a tad too big? How do people harvest old refrigerators, and what do they do with them? How did I get so old?

Varda's journey across France to explore gleaning starts at a farmer's market, and moves on to farms (where industrial equipment eliminates gleaning for wheat but creates mountains of leftover potatoes), vineyards (where gleaning is sometimes banned because the crop is branded), urban dumpsters behind super-

markets (where owners prosecute homeless people), and orchards (where gleaners are cautiously welcome). She also goes to flea markets and art galleries, to fine restaurants and city streets.



Agnès Varda: *La glaneuse*.

We meet people who depend on gleaning to survive, people who have fallen to gleaning through hard times, and people who glean as an art form. One man lives entirely from gleaning ("100 percent!"), as a statement against a wasteful society. Another quietly survives from his gleaning, and spends the rest of his time teaching African immigrants to write and read

French in a dilapidated housing project. Some people make extraordinary art from it, including a set of abandoned refrigerators turned into playful sculptures. One opens up to a scene of shelves full of Playmobil figures, all members of a protest demonstration.

Varda has called her style "subjective documentary," and she is ubiquitous in this film without ever being self-absorbed. She is unafraid, it seems, of the viewer's judgment as she ponders the gray roots of her hair, the liver spots on her skin, even her failure to turn off the camera as she trudges through a field. She claims herself as a character in the story—a gleaner of images, stories, experiences.

This seemingly modest claim cloaks a grander life project, one in which she, as a socially engaged artist, has insistently experimented with film form. While a lifelong filmmaker, with internationally awarded works such as *Cleo from 5 to 7* (1962), *Lion's Love* (1968), *One Sings, the Other Doesn't* (1976), *Vagabond* (1985) and her tribute to husband Jacques Demy *Jacquot de Nantes* (1990), Varda resists

specialization as an essayist. Like the writer John Berger, she works in image, word, experience and argument, celebrating the richness of lived human experience. She was educated in a visual arts tradition, primarily painting, and came to film from photography. She has never lost sight of film as an experiment in visual expression. So you may be as likely to compare *The Gleaners and I* to a poem or to a painting as to a documentary.

The Gleaners and I has the signature elements of a Varda film. Iconic objects provide visual metaphors and echo themes of the film. In heart-shaped pota-

atoes—vegetables that fail to fit the agri-industrial mold—she evokes warm, loving relationships. There is Varda's lifelong fascination with the process of time and aging, which we see in objects (a clock without hands that the filmmaker gleans while foraging) and in her own body. There is a delighted connection with her artistic and cultural her-

itage, shown in references to famous paintings of gleaners, in Biblical references, in visits with artists and museum curators. There is the insistence on the homemade—and the handmade—aesthetic as a quiet act of resistance to industrial, formulaic filmmaking. And there is her uncritical empathy with the challenge of being ordinarily human, whether toward denizens of a trailer camp or an immigrant collage artist.

This is not a political film. It doesn't urge you to recycle, or stop persecuting gleaners and pickers, or improve conditions in the fields, or create better social services. That would all be nice and worthwhile, but Varda's film is not concerned with mobilization. Her work never is; that has been, at times, a source of criticism from the left. Varda understands herself as an artist in her artwork and in her life; she finds and commits ordinary beauty. She is interested in other people like her, stubbornly assertive individuals in situations that often threaten to smother them.

Enjoyment is supremely important to her, as the leisurely pace of the film

makes clear. She savors her interchanges. She delights in the competence and creativity of people who have little. She is filled with wonder at the odd coincidence that underlines meaning. (A painting of gleaners before a storm is taken out of storage into a courtyard, just as a gust of wind comes up.) And she is not above constructing the oddball scene, as when she puts a real judge with warm and crinkly eyes into the fields to read the law on gleanings.

Of course, the film has social and political implications, some highly topical. "We are all gleaners," she said at the Toronto Film Festival in 2000, where the film debuted in North America before a brief theatrical run. "We glean knowledge, information, we glean inspiration from the classics, we glean from overheard conversations."

Yes. In fact, this is a film that could kick off every congressional hearing, every court case, every copyright tribunal process dealing with intellectual "property," and who should control it. In those circles, gleanings are just lumped in with a

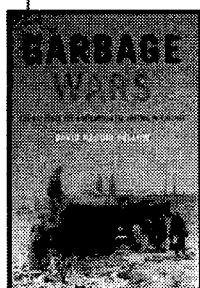
wide range of other information sampling habits and called "piracy."

The film premiered at Cannes and ran for eight months in French theaters. It capped a Varda retrospective at the Film Forum in New York. At Toronto, Varda was feted and thronged. She noted wryly, however, that although she has a track record going back to 1954, an entry in every film encyclopedia, and in France is a celebrity artist, "no one wanted to fund this film." So she made the film with her own funds, and is recouping the investment slowly.

It's good news, then, for us and for her that videocassette and DVD versions of *The Gleaners and I* are now available. For the DVD, in fact, she made a follow-up film celebrating the authors of that outpouring, and updating viewers on the characters of the first film. It's the kind of thoughtful gesture—a combination of thank-you note and update—that you would expect from the person you meet in *The Gleaners and I*. ■

Pat Aufderheide's latest book is *The Daily Planet: A Critic on the Capitalist Culture Beat* (University of Minnesota).

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For the Ages

By Gabe Klinger

Manoel de Oliveira, at 94 the world's only living and active director to have begun his career in the silent era, peoples his films with kings and peasants, virgins and whores, egotists and humanists. A Portuguese director only a generation or two from his own ancestral nobility, de Oliveira is preoccupied not only by his country's past, but by the generous expository traditions still prevalent in theater, literature and architecture—traditions that he and early spearheads like Orson Welles, Fritz Lang and John Ford attempted to preserve in their movies.

So what does it say about an entire country's film industry if their most well-known and successful director is also the most *recherché* in all the world? Manoel de Oliveira is the grandfather and inheritor of Portuguese cinema. Instead of being considered an impeding influence, an old dog that just won't die, the most up-to-date Portuguese filmmakers recognize that de Oliveira is just as much a part of a national "new wave" as they are, with fewer artistic and financial limitations than any time in the country's past 50 years.

Like Spain a fascist country until the '70s where one would have to travel to France to try and see films (and occasionally make them), Portugal is also one of the poorest nations in Europe. In the late '70s, however, came forward a cinephile with a checkbook and contacts to match his passion for film. The Lisbon-born, Paris-based Paolo Branco is famous for being de Oliveira's guardian angel (he's produced at least 15 of his films), but even more famous for turning Portuguese cinema to the attention of the international art house market. Whether he turns a profit is unclear, but his world sales (through Gemini Films in Paris and his video and distribution affiliates in Portugal), always guarantee that the

next film by the next young (or old) master gets made.

If de Oliveira owns the well of ideas, Branco is definitely the transporter, who showed others that there was an audience



There is an audience to be cultivated for *Oporto of My Childhood*, but will it include American moviegoers?

to cultivate (different from simply attracting an audience), and that Portugal needed an art cinema. The new Portuguese filmmakers are Pedro Costa, Teresa Vilaverde, João Canijo, Alberto Seixas Santos, João Pedro Rodrigues—some of them produced by Branco, some not—and experienced masters like João Cesar Monteiro and João Botelho. Unlike de Oliveira, none from this list have been theatrically distributed in the United States.

The reason for this might go deeper than mere content, their success as films or each individual director's ability to connect with an audience. Pedro Costa, who so far has made six films, is a small genius already receiving a retrospective at the Cinematheque Ontario later this year. João Cesar Monteiro is the reigning chronicler of moral perversion in Portuguese cinema; two of his films (and more are reportedly on the way) have appeared under our noses on DVD. A couple of venues in San Francisco and Brooklyn have featured series of "New Portuguese Cinema," where some films by Teresa

Vilaverde and João Botelho received their American premieres (but, alas, never resurfaced).

The problem is more simple than most of us imagine: Portugal is not represented, like Iran and Taiwan were a few years ago, as a country whose filmmakers are responding to national change. Individual works, like João Pedro Rodrigues' *O Fantasma* (2000) or João Canijo's *Get a Life* (2001), tend to show up obscured in the sidebars of festivals—of Latino or gay interest, for example—but not in the general context they deserve.

De Oliveira's *I'm Going Home* (2001), a film made in France with mostly French actors—not really atypical for the director—was picked-up for American distribution by Milestone Films (one of the most adventurous distributors in the country) and booked in plenty of smaller theaters all over the country, opening to great reviews. *I'm Going Home* may be one of de Oliveira's best, but in the same year he took festival audiences aback with his majestic portrait of his hometown, *Oporto*.

Too personal for an American release, *Oporto of My Childhood* doesn't speak volumes about the human condition and rejuvenation of age. But *Oporto* is a film with its own unique set of cultural and emotional values, made with the distinction of being a film that can't be replicated by anyone, anywhere else.

So what does that leave the foreign market? *Oporto of My Childhood*, a film with a limited repertoire that might be better suited hanging on the walls of the Portuguese *cinemateca*? Or *I'm Going Home*, a masterwork of amassed creative disillusionment, with many entry points and a straighter narrative? The sway of audiences may have always been self-evident, but the passivity of tastemakers has never aided in the creation of such works. ■

Gabe Klinger is co-editor of 24 FPS magazine (online at www.24fpsmagazine.com).

Let's Make a Movie

By G. Pascal Zachary

The stout government minister, himself an actor in his youth for the Ghana Broadcasting Corporation, stood before a gathering of his country's leading moviemakers. "All is not well with local films," Jake Obetsebi-Lamprey declared in a manicured English accent. "We need to project a better image of Ghana in our movies. Our negative stories ill serve our nation."

In the audience, Ghana's leading film producer, a gentle Muslim man named Moro Yaro, stared into space. At Ghana's third annual version of the Oscars, held on October 12, Yaro's movies would sweep the prizes, winning best film, director, screenplay and male and female lead actors. But critics gave Yaro no chance to celebrate, hijacking the event, which was broadcast live on national television.

First, the head of Ghana's commission on national culture, a government agency,

excoriated local films for peddling stereotypes about dishonest husbands, faithless wives and "evil" in-laws. Then the chairman of the awards committee whined that too many of the 24 films made over the prior year relied on "supernatural" plot twists, a codeword for *juju*, or African magic. And finally there was the withering attack from the government's chief mouthpiece, Obetsebi-Lamprey.

In visits to Ghana, I've gotten to know Yaro, and I sat next to him at the ceremony. As the criticism mounted, I gently asked why he did not take the microphone and defend himself. He shook his head and whispered, "No one wants to hear from me."

Yaro's answer to his critics is to keep making movies. For less than \$15,000, he produces a 90-minute feature. The budget alone seems amazing given that the cost of a single lunch for a Hollywood crew can

exceed his total spending, including promotion. His company, Princess Films, runs out of a shabby office on a nameless street in Osu, Accra's only trendy neighborhood. Yaro directs visitors to a local landmark, a police station, from where a small Princess sign is barely visible.

The week after the awards ceremony, Yaro commenced work on another installment in his *Ripples* series. In last year's debut, a female lead extorted money from married men who impregnated girlfriends and then abandoned them. The woman even went so far as to arrange for the beating of the daughter of a greedy business executive who at first refused to pay.

In the *Ripples* sequel, which won four awards, a young woman is forced by circumstances to live with an aunt, whose husband then relentlessly pursues her for sex. In a part of the world where mistresses and indeed multiple wives are widely accepted, a rebellious woman, bent on revenge against men, seems shocking.

Yet the women characters in *Ripples* are sometimes defeated for reasons that suggest an unwillingness of directors to challenge common prejudices. The vengeful woman in the original *Ripples*, rather than achieving a heroic apotheosis, is arrested and, without any irony, disgraced and discarded in the end of the film. "We need better stories and a broader portrait of our lives and society," says Veronica Quarshie, who directs and cowrites the *Ripples* films.

Studiously avoiding the images of abject poverty and filth that are hallmarks of daily life in Ghana, Quarashie's melodramas offer an escape from reality, showing characters driving foreign cars and chattering on mobile phones, a lifestyle available only to a few privileged Africans. But while white-washing poverty and ignoring politics altogether, these films discomfort elites because of their relentless assault on the inequities in male-female relations, portraying African men as backward, if not downright cruel.

Frank talk about the routine brutality against women is rare in Ghana, which is probably why Yaro's films strike a chord with ordinary people. "There is a growing desire among women to settle scores, and even men realize that they must moderate their behavior," says Juliet Asante, the actress who starred as the rebel woman in the first *Ripples*.

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These populist films, while didactic and predictable, at least present an alternative to elite allegiance to the visual arts of former colonialists. In the quarter-century following Ghana's independence from British rule in 1957, government subsidized filmmakers through a state agency modeled after the British Broadcasting Corporation. State financ-

For less than the cost of lunch for a Hollywood film crew, West Africans make their own blockbusters.

ing led to the production of such minor classics as *Love Brewed in the African Pot* (1981) by director Kwaw Ansah.

In Francophone Africa, subsidies to filmmakers from the French government spawned a generation of well-trained and high-minded directors, including Ousmane Sembene (Senegal), Souleymane Cissé (Mali) and Idrissa Ouedraogo (Burkina Faso). These and other French-speaking directors made movies that were acclaimed by discerning critics in Europe and the United States, but rarely screened at home. The French justified African movie subsidies as part of a defense of the French language globally and the influence of France with its former African colonies, but African directors gradually began to mourn their alienation from their roots.

But the collapse of African economies in the '80s led to the gradual withdrawal of state support for moviemakers. In Ghana, for instance, the government sold off its film unit to a private company a few years ago, and only a shell of the former operation remains. Ansah's classic is out of print and impossible to find in Ghana, and he has stopped making films, unwilling to work in lower-cost video.

The new generation of movie producers in Ghana, led by Yaro, have resorted to short shooting schedules, semi-professional actors and videotape to pare down budgets. Films sell on the streets of Accra for \$2 each. Moviemakers sometimes earn extra from theater exhibitions and broadcasting on one of the country's three television stations. All together, a hit film is lucky to take in \$20,000.

To be sure, globalization influences the aspirations of these filmmakers. Pirated American movies flood the country via the United States and Britain, often selling for little more than Ghana's own films. While Ghana's government censors forbid nudity and even passionate kissing in Ghanaian-made movies, foreign films enter the country uncut. In another contradiction, the government bans video rentals of domestic films, though no such ban against foreign movies exists.

Meanwhile, movies from Nigeria, a nearby English-speaking country, threaten to swamp Ghana's audiences. While Nigerian movies also adhere to restrictions on sexuality, they can boast larger budgets because of the sheer size of Nigeria: At 120 million people, Nigeria has six times the population of Ghana and producers are turning out an estimated 400 movies a year.

These films follow the same formula as Ghanaian movies. They tend to present cartoon versions of crime dramas, invoke *juju* to explain plot twists and concentrate on everyday betrayal between men and women. The market for "art" films in Nigeria is virtually non-existent, but the country's pulp movies dominate television and movie theater screens. The most popular titles sell an estimated 200,000 copies on videocassette.

Filmmakers in both Ghana and Nigeria say their work is bound to improve. Zack Orji, a leading actor and director in Nigeria, has increasingly tackled more

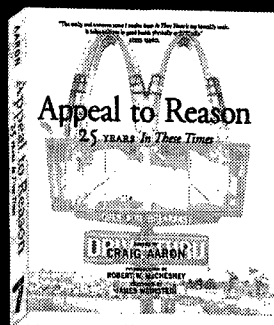
serious themes, such as the plight of a woman who cannot bear her husband a child and is forced to endure the presence of a second (and fertile) wife. "We need to be more daring and try new things, even as we struggle with the reality of making money," Orji says.

Orji, who is self-taught, recently toured French-speaking countries of West Africa, where leading filmmakers are beginning to accept that government subsidies will likely never return. They're eager to learn from Nigerians how to make low-budget movies. In this regard, technology is on the side of Africans who are on the verge of switching from analog to digital video, which will allow for sharper pictures, better sound and easier editing.

"The question is not whether we Africans can make great films," says Orji, whose latest movies are filmed and edited in Ghana. "The question is whether we play in movies at all given all the foreign productions out there. I believe, whatever the quality of our films, our people will get any chance to hear their own voices and see their own faces."

And out of the identification with those voice and faces, great art may someday spring. Until then, the global homogenized culture, which threatens the regional and continental distinctiveness of Africa, is held at bay. And that's no mean feat. ■

G. Pascal Zachary is the author of *The Diversity Advantage: Multicultural Identity in the New World Economy*, to be published in January by Westview.



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Continued from back cover

the principal setting, a bathhouse whose clients include a massively polluted river-deity and an enormous "radish spirit." The bathhouse is run with an iron fist by one Yubaba, a mean old witch (who nonetheless does have her good points). That Chihiro becomes a kind of indentured servant in this place thanks to her profligate parents—Yubaba turns them into pigs after they noisily and grotesquely devour some food left out for the gods—is a detail surely not lost on the film's Japanese audiences, who for a decade have lived with the economic consequences of an earlier generation's extravagance. The spirit world teems with the lost souls of capitalism, harrowingly glimpsed at dusk as Chihiro frantically searches for her parents. (Banned from the bathhouse, these "No-Face" gluttons are unable to responsibly handle such luxury.)

The malevolence of the spirit world's reaction to Chihiro is a far cry from the gentler, agrarian world of *My Neighbor Totoro* (1988), where the titular forest spirit amiably grunts and gestures his acceptance of the human children who seek his help. But in Miyazaki's quasi-animist universe, flora and fauna aren't jauntily anthropomorphized à la Disney, they simply *are*, and humans must coexist with them. This is not always a *Totoro*-like warm and fuzzy proposition: In *Princess Mononoke*, where people have done some very awful things, it means contending with the wrathful denizens of the endangered Forest of the Deer God. In *Spirited Away*, there are consequences for dumping trash into rivers—or filling them in outright to service urban sprawl.

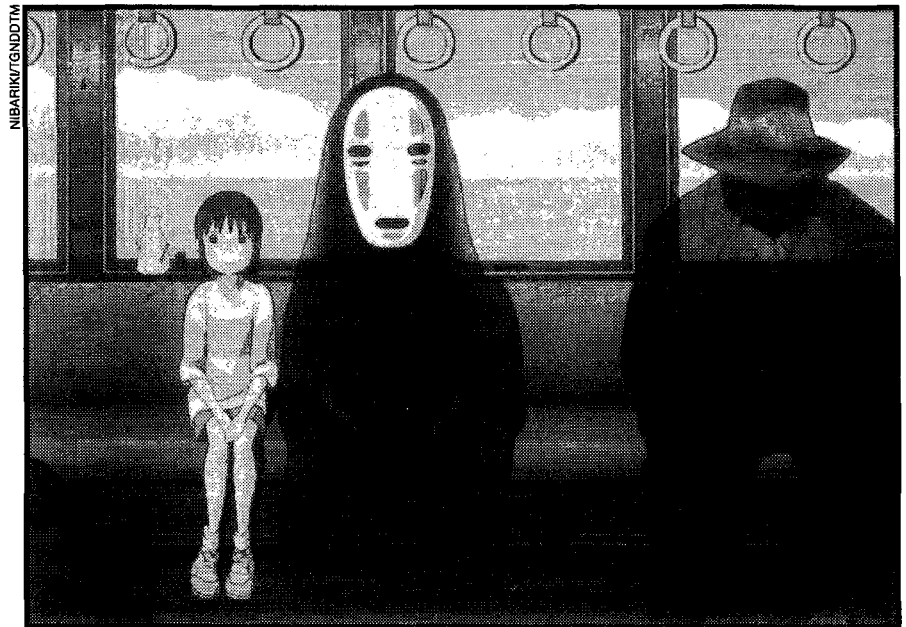
Both *Mononoke* and *Spirited Away* can be at times disturbing—but so too is the episodic terror of the original *Alice in Wonderland*, from which Alice nonetheless emerges a more enlightened young woman. What makes Miyazaki's movies great, and so eminently suitable for children, is the manner in which these films arrive at their endings, which are indeed quite happy. In *Princess Mononoke*, the humans' iron foundry may be rapaciously destructive to the forest, but Lady Eboshi—its fiercely feminist leader—employs women, lepers and other castoffs accorded no other place in medieval Japanese society. The villainy is not so cut and dry. It falls on an indigenous human prince—whose people are as endangered as the forest—to find a way to draw the two sides into constructive and meaningful cooperation. In *Spirited Away*, Chihiro likewise learns to recognize the legitimate claims of competing interests, which directly helps her own quest to save her parents from porcine oblivion.

There is a mature morality on colorful and humor-filled display here, one that stands in pointed contrast to the childish fantasies of tit-for-tat vengeance at the heart of too much cinema—and political discourse—pitched to adults and children alike. In the present climate, America would be well served by a wide distribution of *Porco Rosso* (1992), a Miyazaki gem rarely seen over here. A fond homage to the roughneck culture of early aviation, the film is also, along the way, a gently rigorous parable of creeping authoritarianism.

The eponymous hero, a flying-ace mercenary pig, patrols the Italian Mediterranean between the world wars. When one of his old human chums from the Air Force tries to convince him to rejoin the military, Porco snorts, "Better a pig than a fascist." Thuggish air pirates, led by an opportunistic Hollywood actor, join up with the Blackshirts, and Porco becomes an enemy of the state. Like much of Miyazaki's work, you cannot quite believe you're watching an animated children's picture.

The good news is that we might actually soon get a fair chance to see *Porco Rosso* and other movies from the formidable canon of Studio Ghibli, the animation house Miyazaki cofounded in 1985 with fellow director Isao Takahata. This is because *Spirited Away* appears to be a Ghibli first: something of a bona fide theatrical hit in America, steadily but remarkably accumulating a following in its second month of a modest stateside release. Disney, stung by the flop of its poorly dubbed version of *Princess Mononoke*, cautiously floated *Spirited Away* to 26 theaters in September. Now that number is up to 151, and the film is gamely holding its own on a crowded playing field. (*Red Dragon*, for example, hogged 3,363 screens on its opening weekend.)

Undoubtedly, this momentum has a lot to do with Pixar's John Lasseter, a longtime Studio Ghibli devotee, who handled the film for Disney and treated it with uncommon rev-



erence from the beginning, supervising an excellent English dub that puts to shame the Miramax-conceived maiming of *Mononoke*. Disney, much to its credit, has even taken the unprecedented step of also distributing *Spirited Away* in English-subtitled Japanese prints, for those who prefer to view the original.

Let it be a lesson for the studios: Treat a master filmmaker with respect, and reap the rewards. More to the point: Treat a child with respect, and discover a whole new world. ■

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Animated Spirit

By Joe Knowles

With a little help from a rotund forest spirit, a teen-age witch and the odd flying pig, Hayao Miyazaki has spent a lifetime redefining animation and the possibilities of cinema for children. But after

his 1997 eco-fable *Princess Mononoke* smashed box-office records in Japan, he indicated that perhaps it was time to step aside.

"I wanted to retire," Miyazaki, 62, explained to Roger Ebert. "I opened all the drawers in my head; they were all empty. So I realized I had to make a movie just for 10-year-olds, and *Spirited Away* is my answer."

That this ostensibly kids-only picture went on to top *Mononoke* and become Japan's biggest blockbuster in history may suggest that Miyazaki was

being unduly modest with Ebert—or, perhaps, that General MacArthur wasn't so far off the mark when he infamously described the country he occupied as a "nation of 12-year-olds." Certainly, a variation of this patronizing attitude—a belief that American adults are too sophisticated to watch "just a cartoon"—has kept Miyazaki's luminous art relatively obscure on this side of the Pacific.

But here, the problem is not just that animation is considered the exclusive domain of kids. The problem, more precisely, is that animation is dismissed *because* of its association with children. In this way, we dismiss not just an art form but the intellectual needs of children as well. Not surprisingly, the average Hollywood kidflick is a dreary studio exercise in cross-promotional synergy.

Spirited Away, on the contrary, is proof of the great cinema that is possible when somebody takes the wild mind of a 10-year-old seriously. For on one level, the film really is intended just for children: It lacks the unified simplicity of earlier Miyazaki classics like *My Neighbor Totoro* or *Kiki's Delivery Service*, which a grown-up, literary sensibility can easily appreciate. In *Spirited Away*, the sheer density of fantastic imagery—all of it meticulously hand-drawn—can be both breathtaking and baffling to the over-12 set. The most bizarrely unethered creation of Miyazaki's career, the story of young Chihiro's picaresque journey through a supernatural underworld very quickly spins beyond the point of no return.

After tumbling down the rabbit hole, you're pretty much on your own to make heads or tails of

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